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**"NOT SAPPHO, SACCO:" RADICALISM AND RESISTANCE IN AMERICAN
WOMEN'S POETRY, 1915-1945.**

by

Nancy Berke

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
The City University of New York

1998

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It is hard to say when and where this dissertation actually began and what individual or activity may have first sparked my imagination and prepared me to write it. One thing I know is had I not had the temerity to ask the esteemed feminist scholar Jane Marcus to guide me in this project it would have remained only an amorphous idea. I owe the ultimately successful end result of my work to Professor Marcus's skill as a reader, editor, and of course, scholar. In addition to her vital insights and input, her camaraderie, as it were, was also essential to the completion of this project. She believed in the ideas inside this dissertation from the very beginning and encouraged me to explore, expand, and most important, fight for them. In addition to Professor Marcus, Professors Wayne Koestenbaum and Florence Howe provided invaluable criticism and support of my project as it neared its completion.

Page Delano read early drafts of my thesis and even earlier helped me explore some of my ideas on panels in which we participated on women's writing and feminist scholarship. Cheryl Fish and Caroline MacKenzie were also there to lend support. Shuang Shen was dissertation reading partner extraordinaire. Her brilliant insights, patience, and over-all friendship allowed me to keep writing and finish on schedule.

Susan Brockman, who has been through this process, and Mindy Katzman, who has not, showed support and affection from their own respective places. My parents, Ken and Elaine Berke, provided me with space in their beautiful home during the summer of 1996, and also whenever else I could get away. My older sisters, Terri Steiner and Laurie Berke Segal, were as usual, to quote Amy Lowell, "sobering

things to have." Laurie Berke Segal showed her support of my project in the most special way by making me a beautiful ink and pastel drawing of Lola Ridge, which hung over my desk as I completed my thesis.

Writing a dissertation on non-canonical radicals required much foraging in archives. As tedious and ultimately satisfying as this process was, I was glad to have the assistance of the staffs and librarians at a number of important collections and institutions. These were the Rare Book and Manuscript Room at Butler Library of Columbia University; the Manuscript Division of New York Public Library, which houses the papers of Genevieve Taggard; the Tamiment Library at New York University; the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College, which houses the papers of Lola Ridge; the Rare Books and Special Collections at Princeton University; the Department of Special Collections at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, and the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University. The special collections librarians at the Van Pelt Library at the University of Pennsylvania and the Baker Library at Dartmouth College took care of my requests as well. The CUNY Graduate School provided me with the necessary funds to visit most of these archives as well as obtain photocopies of needed materials from them. Norman Clarian, in the Inter-Library Loan office of the Hunter College Library, processed what seems like endless book requests on my behalf.

In 1936, during one of the darkest periods of the Twentieth Century, Bertolt Brecht wrote, "In the dark times \ Will there also be singing? \ Yes, there will be singing \ About the dark times." During this same dark period Lola Ridge,

Genevieve Taggard, and Margaret Walker, the subjects of this dissertation, were also writing about the dark times. Reading these women and writing about them in the dark years of the 1990s, brought in some much needed light.

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Chapter One

"The Buried History Within the Buried History:" Women Poets on the Left

I was a Communist when I painted *Nazis Murder Jews* about a Communist torchlight parade in about 1936...I showed the painting at the ACA Gallery. A critic wrote, "An interesting painting, but the sign is too obvious." But if **they had noticed** that sign thousands of Jews might have been saved.¹

(Alice Neel in the 1970s)²

What's in the men nowadays -- the *women* have the fire & the ardency & the power & the depth.

(Genevieve Taggard in a letter to Josephine Herbst, early 1920s)³

This dissertation concerns itself with two aspects of revisionary practice within modern American poetry. The first is suggested by painter Alice Neel's recollection of the importance and problematic reception of social messages as they began to appear within modernist discourse in the first half of the Twentieth Century. The second is suggested by poet Genevieve Taggard's (a subject of this study) implication

¹ bold mine

²

See Alice Neel: Paintings from the Thirties. New York: Robert Miller Gallery, 1997. I am grateful to Laurie Segal for bringing this exhibition catalogue to my attention.

³

Qtd. in Drake, William. The First Wave: Women Poets in America, 1915-1945. New York: Macmillan, 1987. Drake's book is the first to explore in some detail the left poetics of Lola Ridge and Genevieve Taggard. In its desire to tell a wider narrative about "women poets in America, 1915-1945," this pioneering study does not provide the kind of cultural, historical, and ultimately political reading required to complicate Ridge and Taggard's subjectivities as I hope to do here.

that the emergence of the woman writer in the 1920s would change the literary landscape, and that new questions about art and society would begin to be asked. What happened to that political female poetic, that fire, that ardency, that power, that depth?

The project's emphasis is on what Louise Bernikow identified over twenty years ago as "the buried history within the buried history" (45).⁴ I explore the socially conscious verse of radical, feminist women poets and the contributions they made towards a multi-valent poetry of the left produced as one of many competing poetry projects of the modernist period (1910- 1945). Alice Neel's and Genevieve Taggard's remarks serve as reminders of this "buried history within the buried history." As post-war criticism, particularly the New Critics with their anti-historical, anti-sociological bent, was successful in rooting out the "obvious"— artistic projects that reminded their audience of urgent social meanings, so was that critical attitude successful in silencing women — especially those whose "depth," "power," and "ardency" went into constructing a socially conscious aesthetic.

My dissertation examines and recovers the work of three radical, feminist voices: Lola Ridge (1873-1941), Genevieve Taggard (1894-1948), and Margaret Walker (1915-). It joins the ongoing discussion of American Modernism's contested

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See Bernikow's fine introduction to The World Split Open: Four Centuries of Women Poets in England and America, 1552- 1950. New York: Vintage Books, 1974. She adds to the comment referenced in the text: "Women on the left in America have been banished from contemporary consciousness by the slow erosion of neglect" (45).

terrain and responds to Cary Nelson's contention that the canon of modern American poetry tells only one side of a more complex literary history of the poetries of the period. Though Ridge, Taggard, and Walker were not alone in their interest in writing poems that bore witness to social and political repression in America, they are nonetheless representative of a neglected poetic discourse; left oriented poets and poetry have been historically marginalized, buried by literary histories that classify either the "poem as object" popularized by the New Criticism, or the abstract disinterestedness found in the traditions of canonical poets such as T.S. Eliot and Marianne Moore. I want to explore the alternative social spaces that Ridge, Taggard, and Walker created in their work in that interest; I perform close readings of their poems, reading the poems and the poets back into their historical, cultural, and political contexts. My project helps address a serious gap in the study of both modern American poetry and feminist criticism, by focusing specifically on the neglect of non-canonical women poets. Though recent studies have explored the work of male radicals, both in poetry and in fiction, very few studies have concentrated specifically on women's political poetry of the first half of the Twentieth Century. This dissertation is the first study that I know of to create a link between white (Ridge and Taggard) and black (Walker) women's radical lyrics by exploring both the interrelatedness of the political subjects on which the three poets wrote, and the interconnectedness of the radical discourses in which these women participated. My aim is also to make the case for another counter-tradition to both the canonical feminist literary tradition and the primarily aesthetic focus placed on the study of

women's poetry during the period of literary modernism.

That Lola Ridge, Genevieve Taggard, and Margaret Walker bore witness to some of the worst atrocities in both national and international history cannot be overlooked. That these writers participated in other forms of social dialogue, yet were also 'poets' are facts that must be combined in order to assess their contributions as twentieth century left intellectuals. Interestingly, a recent "Reference Guide" dedicated to a chronological and intertextual representation of American women writers, Women Writers in the United States: a Timeline of Literary, Cultural, and Social History, includes the publication of volumes of poetry by Ridge, Taggard, and Walker as part of an historical timeline with far greater scope than what might be gleaned from a purely "literary" guide to women authors. These three poets, whose names, works, and dates, appear more than once, are placed within a complex social/historical nexus of activity in the United States from pre-conquest and colonial beginnings up to the present.⁵ Ridge, Taggard, and Walker come together again as like-minded social / political writers in Paul Lauter et al's important revisionist textbook The Heath Anthology of American Literature. The Heath Project's editor's

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This text compiled by Cynthia Davis and Kathryn West was put out by Oxford UP in 1996. "Women Writers in the United States weaves [a] rich and multi-hued historical fabric out of political and world events, everyday occurrences, medical advances, founding moments, lifestyle changes, demographics, conferences, crusades, statistics, inventions, survey results, crazes...These in turn encompass the broad spectrum of women's writing that serves as the core of this timeline..." (x). The book started as research assistance its authors performed for Cathy Davidson's and Linda Wagner-Martin's edition of The Oxford Companion to Women's Writing in the United States.

concern in this project is with the narrowness with which American Literature is taught. Its emphasis on cultural difference and voices on the margins, as well as the problems with canons, creates a broader perspective in which to view American letters. My project then offers a complementary dialogue with texts like The Heath Anthology.⁶ Yet, as important as such a project is I am not merely interested in recuperating neglected authors and texts, I examine the work of Lola Ridge, Genevieve Taggard, and Margaret Walker because it gives significant insight into the kinds of human experiences that criticism of modern poetry often neglects to emphasize. We need these poets to remind us of where we have been and where we are going. We need them to remind us not only how multivalent American aesthetic expression has been, but also how diverse our social experiences have been and — importantly — how tragic. These poets who have written about world wars and race wars, labor struggles and domestic struggles, and composed poems inspired from newspaper headlines and actions in the streets, can also tell us about the buried lives of women and men who also bore witness: to the horrific and the heroic, to the

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The anthology, now going into its third edition, is targeted towards the survey course of American Literature from the Civil War to the present. The work of Lola Ridge and Genevieve Taggard appear in a special section within the modern period 1910-1945 (edited by Cary Nelson) entitled "A Sheaf of Political Poetry." Margaret Walker's poetry and an excerpt from the novel Jubilee appear in a section, "Issues and Visions in Modern America." In this section she shares interesting contradictory space with John Dos Passos, Michael Gold, Meridel LeSueur, John Crowe Ransom, Anzia Yezierska, Saunders Redding, Pietro Di Donato, Mourning Dove, the anonymous poetry of early Chinese immigrants, etc. See also Paul Lauter's Canons and Contexts. New York: Oxford UP, 1990, and Lillian Robinson, In the Canon's Mouth. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1997.

ordinary and the sublime, to the aesthetically different and the culturally different, to the daring and the mundane. They construct a past that is useful to us in the present.

While I place the poetry of Lola Ridge, Genevieve Taggard, and Margaret Walker in a "tradition" of left poetry, which is itself a highly diverse "tradition," I place myself in a tradition within left feminist criticism. My interest in the historical conditions that give rise to literary production, and the social history that is depicted inside the literary text, aligns me with certain aspects of Marxist or socialist feminist criticism. This focus, which allows me to embrace the poetry of Lola Ridge, Genevieve Taggard, and Margaret Walker because of these writer's struggles with a tradition of socialist-feminist ideas, is decidedly outside most feminist critical perspectives on modern poetry. If Marxist or socialist-feminist criticism is interested in social / historical processes, as well as reading class along with, or inseparably from, gender, then my project represents an oppositional, though much needed dialogue, within mainstream feminist criticism and modern American poetry criticism.⁷ What makes my project rather different from most poetry studies that

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Marxist and socialist feminist criticism has had far greater appeal in Great Britain. Michele Barrett's Women's Oppression Today (London: Verso, 1980, 1988), Juliet Mitchell's Woman's Estate (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), my own personal favorite, Sheila Rowbotham's Woman's Consciousness, Man's World (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), are considered 'classics' of socialist-feminist criticism. Nonetheless, American feminists have produced socialist-feminist criticism that has influenced a (slightly) younger generation of Americanist scholars like myself: Tillie Olsen's Silences (New York: Delta, 1979), Lillian Robinson's, Sex, Class, and Culture (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1978), Jane Marcus's Art & Anger (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1988), Judith Newton's and Deborah Rosenfelt's Feminist Criticism and Social Change (New York: Methuen, 1985), and Cora Kaplan's Sea Changes: Essays on Cultural Politics (London: Verso, 1986). A recent book that re-examines

explore female subjectivity as part of poetic practice is my interest in connecting class, which interested Ridge, Taggard, and Walker immensely, to their own representations of female subjectivity. Moreover, the "Pound Era" so successfully documented, as well as canonized, by Hugh Kenner and mapped out for a post-modern audience by Marjorie Perloff in Dance of the Intellect, reflects a critical predilection for the experimental aesthetic, while Ridge, Taggard, and Walker as revolutionary poets, saw themselves as part of the political avant-garde. In fact my thesis runs counter to the canonical modernism outlined in Kenner's and Perloff's studies, which often neglects the politics of the poems and the poets it valorizes — often, alas, fascist politics, or right wing Christians; nevertheless it challenges and attempts to respond to the claims of these two texts to establish a fixed canon of modernist poetry based on a supposedly "apolitical" poetics. My study is revisionist in the important sense that it

Marxist and socialist-feminist criticism in the advent of post-modernism is Donna Landry's and Gerald MacLean's Materialist Feminisms (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993). Landry and MacLean cite the work of Gayatri Spivak as remapping Marxist-feminist criticism from a post-modernist perspective. Two recent critiques of Modernism concretize this difference between British and American feminist perspectives. Jan Montefiore, in Men and Women Writers of the 1930s: The Dangerous Flood of History (New York: Routledge, 1996) devotes an entire chapter to issues of gender and class in British radical poetry of the thirties, not to mention giving voice to "underservedly" (sic) forgotten poets. Margaret Dickie's and Thomas Travisano's Gendered Modernism: American Women Poets and Their Readers (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1996) collected a series of essays on Stein, Moore, H.D., Millay, Laura Riding, Bishop, Rukeyser, and Gwendolyn Brooks. Though the collection's aim is to show how these poets augment the social, textual, and political spaces of modernism, all seven poets have received attention elsewhere, and the questions of class and working class subjectivity are secondary at best.

investigates the social concerns of poets rather than the aesthetic ones.⁸ As I read poetry by Ridge, Taggard, and Walker in its historical contexts, alongside memoirs, strike committee reports, investigative journalism, and worker's reminiscences, I engage in the writing practices of several disciplines, American Studies, Cultural Studies, and New Historicism. I would hope that my thesis, with its interest in connecting class, race, and ethnicity to gender, will contribute to existing gaps in these interdisciplinary projects, as well.

I. Is There Class in this Text?

In her ground-breaking study Sex, Class, and Culture (1978), Lillian Robinson observed that "the most massive and brutal attempts to deny the existence of an analytic category occur with respect to class" (66). Issues of class are central to my discussion of Lola Ridge, Genevieve Taggard, and Margaret Walker. Though not working-class writers in the traditional sense (all three were educated and "groomed" for a life beyond employment in other people's kitchens, factories, and office buildings), they identified with, lived among, protested alongside, and dreamed their creative acts through disenfranchised, working-class America. Yet the idea of class as

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See The Pound Era (Berkeley: U of California P, 1971). In The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985) Marjorie Perloff outlines Poundian modernism and the (white, male) tradition that follows it: Joyce as "co-respondent," Williams, Oppen (a Marxist who identified with right wing poetics), Beckett, and the post-modernism of John Cage and the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets. These two texts and the "tradition(s)" they formulate have had enormous influence on scholarship in modern American poetry. Studies in this tradition often favor the intellectual over the social and the aesthetic over the historical.

a category of study in relation to modern American poetry has suffered from severe historical amnesia. The dialogues and debates about class in relation to art were significant features of American literary culture during the 1930s. We have, for the most part, forgotten these discussions, particularly so when we address gender. Cary Nelson's Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910-1945, published in 1989, created a landmark theoretical base on which to dialogue about the genre from a class perspective. Nelson's post-structuralist readings of modern American poetry, which decry boundaries, limits, or any fixed discursive practice within the genre (or any field of literary studies), may have established a platform for change in poetry studies, yet scant scholarship has followed that examines class as a central trope and the social consequences that accompany it.⁹ Cora Kaplan's announcement in the October 1997 PMLA calling for

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Alan Filreis' book on Wallace Stevens and the 1930s, Modernism from Left to Right, (Cambridge UP, 1994), is an impressive rereading of Stevens' poetry with the work of 30's poets on the left. However, he appears to use the same method of critical evaluation for the markedly different radical poetry of the 1930s as he uses for Stevens' work. Walter Kalaidjian's American Culture Between the Wars: Revisionary Modernism & Postmodern Critique (Columbia UP, 1993) looks at a good deal of radical poetry, reading it together with the visual and political culture of the time. Kalaidjian then, rather ambitiously, attempts to link radical inter-war culture with post-modern poetry and art. Lola Ridge and Genevieve Taggard questionably are linked with the Dynamo school, which centered around the journal Dynamo. Charlotte Nekola's essay on radical poetry by women in the 1930s, "Worlds Moving: Women, Poetry, and Literary Politics of the 1930s," from the book Writing Red: An Anthology of American Women Writers (Feminist Press 1987), is one of the few recent American essays on women's radical poetry of the Depression. Two new books explore the class concerns of modern American poetry while eschewing the purely "aesthetic" evaluation of literary texts. Mark Van Wienen's Partisans and Poets: the Political Work of American Poetry in the Great War (Cambridge UP, 1997) examines the popular poetries produced in the heated political climate of the

articles to reassess the role of class suggests how much class has been shoved aside in pursuit of other epistemological categories: "[C]lass is perhaps the least examined and most elusive and vulnerable of the social determinants of meaning and subjectivity, such as race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality" (1038). Much work has been done on the categories of race and gender, but little attention has been made to class or towards understanding the necessary trajectory of race, class and gender. Literary Modernist and American studies in the United States are particularly guilty of a kind of cultural blindness when it comes to class. Alan Wald emphatically discusses the intentional silencing of America's radical literary tradition, particularly that tradition as it developed out of the Communist Party during the 1930s. ... "[T]he silencing and distortion of the Communist literary tradition has turned out really to be a means of silencing the larger radical and working-class tradition in literature" (70). My interest in Ridge, Taggard, and Walker as they form part of a counter-tradition in modern American poetry is centrally concerned with their desire to represent working-class life. Ridge, Taggard, and Walker crossed class lines, lived on the margins as writers, as radicals, as women. Margaret Walker lived on the margins as a black, female academic.¹⁰ Lola Ridge, born in Ireland and raised in Australia, was a foreigner, an

first world war. He looks at movements and groups who utilized this poetry and also recovers forgotten black, women, and radical poets. Philip Yannella's The Other Carl Sandburg (U of Mississippi P, 1997) unearths Carl Sandburg's involvement in the American left and his connections to the class warfare and anti-war activism of the period 1915-1920.

¹⁰

See the essay "Black Women in Academia," in How I Wrote Jubilee and Other Essays on Life and Literature. (New York: The Feminist Press, 1990).

anarchist; speaking with an accent, she must have stood out conspicuously. Genevieve Taggard was a communist, and she did not stop being a communist after the Hitler-Stalin pact, or after V-J Day. Enough said. All three wrote sonnets, a form disparaged by modernist critics. Yet not only did they pique certain modernist sensibilities by writing sonnets, but instead of continuing with the sonnet tradition as it was employed by Shakespeare, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Edna St. Vincent Millay, these poets followed the pattern set by Shelley in radical sonnets such as "England in 1819" and "To the Republic of Benevento." Ridge's sonnet "Electrocution" critiques the death penalty through a graphic description of death in the electric chair. Taggard's "Silence in Majorca" honors the Spanish people in their fight against Franco, and Walker's "Whores" examines the traffic in working-class black women. Each poet wrote about race. Ridge wrote about race riots and even identified immigrant Jews as racialized others. Taggard's early poetry and fiction pays homage to working-class Hawaii; her later poems honor the cultural products of Harlem. Walker races working-class life and classes black aesthetics. Yet while "class" remains an oppositional category within modern poetry as a discursive practice, it is very difficult to reclaim these poets in a scholarly discipline that has buried the traditions in which they participated. Wald further articulates what I am up against in my desire to inscribe class into the more popularly scripted and accepted categories of gender and race. It is to reconnect with the communities to which these poets spoke and can still speak, that is also a part of my desire to read and recover these women together. The biases against "classed" literary evaluations

in literary studies is the disempowerment of the population of ordinary people who are denied a genuine history of their own cultural activities through access to authors who write about strikes, rebellions, mass movements, the work experience, famous political trials, the tribulations of political commitment, as well as about love, sex, the family, nature, and war from a class-conscious, internationalist, socialist-feminist, and anti-racist point of view (70).¹¹

In the post-communist world, particularly in America, it has become fashionable to assume the disappearance of the class society, of working-class issues. Class has and continues to be obfuscated through a complexly wrought, institutionally mediated, historical and cultural amnesia. As the late Ralph Miliband has contended: "In the United States, 'working-class' has been all but expunged from the political vocabulary: there are the very rich at the top, the very poor at the bottom, and everybody else is 'middle-class,' whether well-to-do-lawyers and doctors or factory workers and shopkeepers" (19). Importantly, the experiences of working class people are radically different today than they were during the period of mining disasters, marble strikes, and steel industry massacres, which caught the attention of writers like Lola Ridge, Genevieve Taggard, and Margaret Walker. Yet, while working conditions may have greatly improved, wage earning individuals still constitute a majority in the United States, as well as most other industrialized nations. The categories that constitute wage labor may be highly diverse, ranging from part-time college lecturers like myself to office clerks, truck drivers, and food service workers, but grievances about working conditions, hours and hourly pay, discrimination based

¹¹ Qtd. in "Culture and Commitment: US Communist Writers Reconsidered." in Writing from the Left: New Essays on Radical Culture and Politics. London: Verso, 1994.

on race, gender, and sexual orientation still create in working people a sense of powerlessness as well as insecurity, and continue to present themselves as potential sites of struggle.

As unfashionable as it is to talk about class in the United States in the 1990s, it is equally unfashionable to discuss gender in terms of *oppression*. This is particularly true in feminist literary studies. In fact my thesis as it merges the "social determinants" of class, race, and gender, by discussing work of women who wrote socially engaged verse about these very determinants and their deep connection to the politics of oppression, challenges and reminds feminist literary studies that it remains an incomplete, inaccurate project as long as it ignores the importance of class, even as class, as an over-determined category, has changed and become more amorphous: (so have gender and race, but we still do them). Moreover, we must continue to acknowledge the *political* in women's poetry as it addresses class oppression, whether by black writers, lesbian writers, or any other group of marginalized women.¹² (Perhaps Foucault is right in asserting that one falls into the same trap arguing for a counter-tradition to a feminist literary tradition that wants to valorize canonical women writers over all others -- alternatives create their own absolute power bases).

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This fact is important when considering the out-pouring of radical, class conscious poetry produced by women of color since the late 1960s. Poetry by Margaret Walker (the grandmother of the group), Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Sonia Sanchez, Jayne Cortez, Paula Gunn Allen, Joy Harjo, Mitsuye Yamada, Janice Mirikitani, Jessica Hagedorn, Marilyn Chin, Cherrie Moraga, Gloria Anzaldua, Sandra Cisneros, Judith Ortiz Cofer, and Aurora Morales Levins for example, problematizes race, class, and gender as a trajectory that can't be divvied up or watered down by suggestions that one category has primacy over another.

However I am not arguing for a counter-tradition that makes a "canon" out of marginalized writers, I am more interested in reminding readers and scholars that these poets exist and have relevance to contemporary readers, as well that their exclusion from texts and syllabi has happened because of overt, covert, and perhaps unconscious, political decisions made by individuals within feminist literary practice. One way I set out to challenge the forgetfulness of some feminist literary investigations is to complicate certain popular tropes. One theme I focus on in this dissertation is the body – more specifically the working class body. The body has become an important, extremely 'elastic' and popular theoretical site for contemporary feminism. However, what Theresa Ebert describes as "ludic" feminism -- feminist theory's increased interest in the playful over the pragmatic -- in which many of the theories of the body are staged, removes the body from its political inscription. My reading of the body in Lola Ridge's work, for example, is necessarily political and overtly class conscious. I attempt to show how class and political oppression also have a place within feminist discussions of the body. After all, bodies have "class;" something Lola Ridge knew very well. In fact some exciting new feminist scholarship has recognized and recorded how working class women writers 'wrote the body.'

Constance Coiner's study Better Red: The Writing and Resistance of Tillie Olsen and Meridel LeSueur looks at the "body" of work and the cultural and historical bodies through which these two feminist, radical writers "came to writing." Paula Rabinowitz's Labor and Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America rereads and theorizes a lost generation of radical women novelists who

collectively produced a large body of material about working class women's lives during the 1930s. Barbara Foley, Laura Hapke, Deborah Rosenfelt, Suzanne Sowinska, Gay Wilentz, to name a few, have written books or contributed articles about working class women's writing before World War II. Elaine Hedges and Shelley Fisher Fishkin's Listening to Silences: New Essays in Feminist Criticism asked a variety of feminist critics to "rethink" Tillie Olsen's classic text. In fact Deborah Rosenfelt's essay, "Rereading *Tell Me a Riddle* in the Age of Deconstruction," asks us to look at an important working class woman's text from the theoretical perspectives that feminist critics of the "ludic" variety have used while rejecting classed viewpoints. Yet with these important additions to feminist literary and critical practice the well remains dry when it comes to a critical perspective on class in modern American women's poetry.

II. Reading Modern Poetry Problematically

I would like to return for a moment to a text mentioned earlier in this chapter, Cary Nelson's Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910-1945. While Nelson's own attention to gender remains underdeveloped, his revision of literary history allows me to reassess how I value and treat together the work of Lola Ridge, Genevieve Taggard, and Margaret Walker. One of Nelson's most ambitious claims is his questioning the relationship of literary history to canonicity. We need to be aware of the process of how literary forgetfulness occurs: "We no longer know the history of the poetry of the first half of this century" and further argues that what is most troubling about this lack of

knowledge is that we do not even "know that this knowledge is gone" (4). He rightfully interjects the post-structuralist narrative that literary history has characteristically told "a selective story substantially constituted by its cultural presuppositions and restricted by its ideological filters" (5-6). In addition to reading non-canonical writers to get the other side of the literary story, such as that which poets like Ridge, Taggard, and Walker can tell us, Nelson maintains that we must ask "new" questions and avoid making canonical judgements: "Literary history is never written from the vantage point of a secure and stable distance." It is always surrounded by socially determined conceptions of "literariness" (17). Nelson also rightly argues that literary history is detached from history in its broad construction -- both in terms of national history and the "history of everyday life" (7). A claim he makes that is significant for my maintaining a place together for the radicalisms and feminisms of Ridge, Taggard, and Walker is that literary history ignores diversity when it cannot be conveniently placed into a "coherent historical sequence" (7). "The full range of modern poetries is so great that it cannot be persuasively "narrativized" in any unitary way" (7).

One of the absolute strengths of Repression and Recovery is Nelson's insistence that Modernism's contested terrain suggests that the canonical hierarchies that exist between modernisms high and low be torn down. His survey of purposely truncated poetries reads avant-gardists, high modernists, populists, proletarian, rural, regional, communist, feminist poets together as an example of the many signifying contexts in which modern poetry was produced during the first half of the Twentieth

Century. The reason for this eclectic selection is of course to inform readers of the politically scripted content of many of our literary histories. As H. Bruce Franklin remarked back in the late seventies, while eclecticism was anthologized in the twenties and thirties, which included African-American poetry; Native American and Spanish colonial verse; black spirituals, "blues," work songs, folk ballads, Cowboy and Hobo songs, a reactionary literary history was in the making, which excluded such writing. The Fugitive movement, first at Vanderbilt University and later, not surprisingly, at Harvard, aimed to separate the popular from the elite, the vulgar from the refined, the masculine from the feminine, the ruling class from the working class, and made selections of conservative, aesthetically biased poetry that would come to influence the post-war canon. The New Criticism, formalized by the Fugitives, helped the academy in a number of ways to control too much diversity during the insular, paranoid, Cold War years and managed to change the history of American poetry at the same time (101).¹³ Obviously, Cary Nelson makes no attempt to valorize one type of poetry over another, but he does emphasize the outright dismissal of political poetries: "Although political poetry is widely regarded as unimaginatively polemical, in fact, many journals continued to publish political poetry that was experimental, rhetorically

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Two "influential" Fugitive texts were I'll Take My Stand (1930), and Reactionary Essays (1936). Terry Eagleton's comic assessment of the New Critics from his 1983 academic best-seller, Literary Theory is worth noting:

Reading poetry in the New Critical way meant committing yourself to nothing: all that poetry taught you was 'disinterestedness,' a serene, speculative, impeccably even-handed rejection of anything in particular...It was...a recipe for political inertia, and thus for submission to the political status quo (50).

complex, and explicitly modernist" (234). Though Nelson does attempt to describe the burial of political poetry from modernist discourse, the special implications for women, whose work has been twice buried, is never thoroughly assessed or complicated.¹⁴

Nelson is not entirely to blame for the unconscious androcentrism of his text; feminist critics have, for the most part, also ignored political poetry and its articulations of class.¹⁵ One particular feminist text that I would like to engage as a gendered response to Nelson's ambitious project is Betsy Erkkila's Wicked Sisters:

14

In reference to the proliferation of the many eclectic literary journals that appeared in the early decades of the twentieth century, Nelson does complicate women's writing in the following manner:

...[T]he poetry of the feminist movement coexists with the poetry of the unemployed, the poetry of desperation on the farm, the poetry of the industrial work place, and the poetry of black pride. Even when the organized feminist movement collapsed after suffrage was won, radical journals continued, through the 1920s and 1930s, to give special attention to women's issues (234).

15

Shari Benstock, Susan S. Friedman, Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert, for example, have written about women poets and male modernism. These writers have addressed political culture in relation to feminist, modernist poetics, but have ignored the subject of class. Celeste Schenck has written memorably on English feminist poets outside the modernist canon, but has also ignored the discourse of class. Susan Schweik as well as Gilbert and Gubar have written about women's war poetry, without making broader links between class war and world war. Gloria Hull has explored women poets of the Harlem Renaissance. Though class and race as a part of the discourse of black women's poetry are implicitly evoked, the trope of cultural expression so important to the Renaissance overshadows the need to talk about how class complicates the poetics of the movement. Cheryl Walker has documented the private concerns of women poets where class is almost completely overlooked. An unpublished talk Rachel DuPlessis gave on Mina Loy in 1990 ignored two troubling features of Loy's poetics: its overt class snobbery and its veiled anti-semitism: (itself a class problem).

Women Poets, Literary History, and Discord. Unlike Nelson's study, which is both a claim for recovery, and an argument of the impossibility of ever doing so in a satisfying, non-contingent manner, Erkkila's text, though admirable in its attempt to historicize and resituate women's poetry, is ultimately unable to lay all the claims it needs to in order to answer the vast problems of neglect that make the study of modern women poets the totalizing discourse that, as she correctly contends, feminist literary history has allowed it to become. In the introduction to her text, Erkkila discusses how her study situates itself directly inside particular debates within feminist theory to aid her in historicizing the work of Emily Dickinson, Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, Adrienne Rich, and Gwendolyn Brooks.¹⁶ Through a comparative analysis of these poets, Erkkila poses (a not altogether novel assumption) that "the emphasis among many white feminists on both patriarchy as the primal oppression and psychoanalysis as the primary mode of conceptualizing women's "experience" has tended to reduce all women writers to an economy of the same, transhistoricizing and universalizing the lives and works of women writers across, race, class, sexual, and historically specific bounds" (3).¹⁷

While Erkkila is able to see that the instability of the subject deconstructs the

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It is worth asking what Erkkila's text would look like if she had chosen to construct her narrative around poets with whom most readers would be unfamiliar (i.e. Ridge and Taggard, or Lorraine Niedekker, Ruth Lechtinter, Maria de la Veaga Welch, or Eve Merriam). Much has been written about each one of the poets that Erkkila has chosen, and all of them have work in popular, widely read anthologies such as Gilbert & Gubar's Norton Anthology of Women Writers.

¹⁷ What these "historically specific bounds" are she never tells us.

hierarchical positioning of certain types of women poets, she does not attempt to further differentiate the differences of the poets she represents from certain other non-canonical women poets, particularly those whose primary interest is class, not gender. A case in point is the counter-tradition that Erkkila suggests when she mentions Muriel Rukeyser, and quotes from her early poem "Poem out of Childhood." "Not Sappho, Sacco / Rebellion pioneered among our lives" [Rukeyser] declared...to signify her break with traditionally female poetic modes and her commitment to a politically engaged...poetry" (8). Whereas Erkkila seems to think it is the break with "Sappho" that problematizes the fixed subject of "woman poet," and her relationship to a female literary tradition, I contend that it is the name "Sacco" that is the verses' important signifier. The class inequity and social injustice that the mere mention of this name suggested to radical poets like Rukeyser (and Lola Ridge, as I discuss in my chapter on her), is the real critical site that feminist literary history needs to explore. This line of verse also complicates another issue I have with Erkkila's selection of her *differently situated* authors. (italics mine) What about "not Bishop, Rukeyser," or "not Moore, Ridge, or "Not Brooks, Walker?"¹⁸ While Erkkila goes to great lengths to pose "unfixity" and "struggle...as the underlying dynamics of women's literary

 18

To be fair, Erkkila does not limit herself to the modern period, and she does look at Adrienne Rich, a poet deeply affected by the kinds of classed, raced, and gendered articulations that Ridge, Taggard, and Walker wrote about. However, it is important to state that with the exception of Emily Dickinson, (and the subject matter of Brooks and the later Rich) these poets clung very closely to a white, male, Eurocentric idea of literary production, which made, in particular, the articulation of class, extremely difficult.

history" (16), the question of class, as I argue in this project, remains uncontextualized, even in a study that attempts to renegotiate the contested sites of women's poetry.

And so I have called upon these lines of verse, "Not Sappho, Sacco," to title my own search for class in these American women's texts as a sign of the problem of writing class back into a poetic discourse and literary history that has so far remapped the territory of gender and race, but still, to borrow a verb from historian Sheila Rowbotham, remains "blinker" about class and its relationship to the feminist poetics of the modern period.

III. "Not Sappho, Sacco:" Three Left-Wing Women Poets

Before outlining how I examine the work of Lola Ridge, Genevieve Taggard, and Margaret Walker as examples of a left, feminist alternative discourse of modern American poetry, I wish to comment about the problems of representing groups of writers together. The canons and histories that have ignored certain kinds of poetics, most notably "political" poetry and popular verse forms, historically suggest to us the damage done by creating a "who's in, who's out" mentality. No group of poets can be ultimately representative of a whole culture. Generally speaking, however, writers are invariably presented in groups, often through a suggestion of their "aesthetic" similarities, (the "Objectivist" poets for example) intellectual influences, or connection by region. But even these characteristics are problematic. Lola Ridge was originally associated with "Imagism," yet she was a very different poet from other writers placed in this same "group" such as H.D. or Amy Lowell, who were in turn different from

one another. Genevieve Taggard, once described by critic Edmund Wilson as a "Poet of the Pacific," lived most of her writing life on the east coast. Margaret Walker, in certain contexts, is better known as a novelist. Nor does any one poet wear the same "hat" her entire writing career (And neither Ridge, Taggard, nor Walker were much interested in "couture").¹⁹ In fact during the 1920s, literary journals published many disparate "groups" of poets together, destabilizing the notion that poets need to be seen through their "associations." While all three poets published in the traditional poetry venues of the modern period, most notably Poetry Magazine, they also published their work in the more partisan left magazines that surfaced during the Depression. For example Ridge published a badly edited version of her poem "Three Men Die," in The Left. Taggard's poems appeared in The New Masses, to which she also contributed articles. Walker published in New Anvil and a black radical journal, Challenge. All three women poets produced poetry within a given political context. To me this "context" -- the social and political committedness found in their poetry -- is what seals together the very different lives, generations, and poetics of Lola Ridge, Genevieve Taggard, and Margaret Walker. This is where I begin. Moreover, all three poets write about and create a poetic discourse out of the intersections of class,

19

Langston Hughes is a perfect example of the problem of grouping poets; what group should he be placed in? Hughes had a lengthy career and was witness to many historic changes both in literary and intellectual fashion, as well as in social and political life. How do we characterize him? He was an American poet, a black poet, a Harlem poet, a lyric poet, a modernist poet, a labor poet, a Marxist poet, a Depression poet, a Spanish Civil War poet, a gay poet and I'm sure I missed a few along the way.

race, and gender. Yet insomuch as these poets write gender and articulate feminist concerns, women are not their central focus. All three poets believed that social change was impossible without the communal efforts of both sexes.

Two generations pass from the first poet I discuss to the last. The lives of all three poets converge in the 1930s, the most important decade for socially engaged verse in the West. Lola Ridge, in her sixties, was finishing off a career filled with strong political passions and chronic ill health. Genevieve Taggard was in "mid-career," to use a term designated by arts funders, in her forties and already possessed of a reputation.²⁰ Walker had just begun her career by the mid thirties, having published her important poem "For My People" in Poetry magazine while still in her early twenties. Though it is highly doubtful that Walker and Ridge would have met one another, Ridge is known to have been an influence on African-American poets who came of age in the 1930s, as Robert Hayden testified in an interview many years after he had rejected literary radicalism.²¹ Ridge and Taggard knew one another in the twenties and early thirties. A letter from forgotten novelist Evelyn Scott to Ridge

20

A letter in Taggard's private papers written in about 1935 from the by then famous Ernest Hemingway, shows the author, six years her junior, requesting to call her by her nickname "Jed" because that was what he heard everyone called her. The suggestion is that she was someone, in Hemingway's pompous estimation, "worth knowing."

21

Information about this interview and about Hayden's early "African-American Marxism" comes from Alan M. Wald, "Belief and Ideology in the Work of Robert Hayden." in Writing From the Left: New Essays on Radical Culture and Politics. London: Verso, 1994.

suggests that she knew Taggard well enough to gossip about her.²² In Taggard's private papers is a post-card Ridge wrote her from Paris in 1931 suggesting they rendezvous. Ridge was on her way to Persia, and Taggard was in Majorca on a Guggenheim. It is possible that Taggard was introduced to Margaret Walker at the League of American Writers conference in New York in 1939.²³ Richard Wright, who knew both writers well, may have done the introductions.

The fact that these three women each come from different generations that converge in the 1930s is rather important. Most critical work done on radical culture centers on the 1930s, arguably the most important decade for left wing poets and left art in general. However, Lola Ridge's work began to appear in the 1910s; her most prolific period was the 1920s. Genevieve Taggard became known as a literary radical when she edited Poetry from the Masses in 1925. Taggard's most outspoken decade was the thirties, but she continued to write important class conscious, anti-fascist poetry up until her death in 1948. Margaret Walker comes of age as a poet during the red decade of the 1930s, and publishes her first book in the early forties. Yet Walker, now in her eighties, and as far as I know still writing, did not publish a

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In the letter located in the Lola Ridge Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College Library, written in the early twenties, Scott snidely commented how marriage seemed to be doing wonders for Taggard. As I mention in Chapter Three Ridge and Scott complained that neither of their work appeared in the anthology Taggard edited on metaphysical poetry.

23

All three poets signed the 1936 "call" for the formation of the League of American Writers. The organization was founded as a support for the Communist Party's popular front agenda, though many non-party members were active in the league.

second book of poems until the 1960s, a decade also known for its radical art and culture. Walker in fact creates a bridge from the "Old Left" to the "New Left," and her radical black consciousness is recreated in the 1960s as a new audience and a new African American aesthetic began to appear. All three poets explore, expand, retain, and reinvent modernism's radical terrain. All three poets use the idea of a nation and world in need of transformation as a starting point for their aesthetic practice. In many ways it is difficult to discuss Ridge, Taggard, and Walker in the wake of post-modernism. Each writer produced work in an era in which social transformation was advocated. I personally believe American society still needs changing, which is why these writers' work appeals to me in the first place. However, theoretical claims within a post-modern critique, which has pretty much overtaken literary studies, argues that this transformation is highly unlikely. Fellow traveller Genevieve Taggard and her comrades in the Communist Party all thought the revolution was just around the corner; clearly they were wrong. Yet today, I find Taggard's poetry speaks to me because it reminds me, from the very cynical, apolitical, and ahistorical present in which I live, that not all intellectuals accepted their present. However "misguided" Taggard and other thirties radicals were or were not, they worked for change. What I can say for myself through my creation of this text is that I am bad at being post-modern. I have not yet, to borrow from Jean-Francois Lyotard, lost my nostalgia for lost narratives (Landry and MacLean 8). I believe change is possible -- in politics, poetry, and criticism.

Read together, Lola Ridge, Genevieve Taggard, and Margaret Walker produce

a dialogue on social unrest, which is my thesis. I also focus on each poet in individual chapters. I read each poet's poems as they comment upon and connect to social praxis. Although I perform close readings of the writer's work, I do not read their poems as they function explicitly as "poems," in the New Critical fashion. I engage them with the historical material of their time to suggest their continued dialogue with the public sphere in which they were meant to do their work. In Chapter Two I begin with a discussion of Lola Ridge's exploration of the bodily manifestations of violence: capital punishment, lynching, labor exploitation in poems such as "Electrocution" and "Morning Ride," from her third book, Red Flag, and "Lullaby," from her first book The Ghetto. I also look at her interest in representing labor martyrs, also as victimized "bodies," in the poems "Frank Little at Calvary," also from The Ghetto, "Stone Face," and "Three Men Die," from her last collection Dance of Fire. "Three Men Die," in addition to refiguring biblical and classical language to speak against political martyrdom, also explores Ridge's own participation in the protest against Sacco and Vanzetti's execution. In a separate section I discuss her important long poem "The Ghetto," from her first collection of the same name, published in 1918. "The Ghetto" characterizes Jewish immigrant life on New York's Lower East Side, and I examine the poem through its metaphorization of the female body. Chapter Three discusses the Depression era poetry of Genevieve Taggard. I focus on the "proletarian" collection Calling Western Union with an emphasis upon poems that explore the Depression era concerns of women. While poems such as "At Last the Women are Moving" and "Middle-Age, Middle Class Woman at Midnight,"

urge figures of bourgeois women to cross class lines in solidarity with their working class sisters, "Mill Town" and "Everyday Alchemy," are written directly about the hardships of working class women. I examine the biographical essay that frames Calling Western Union, which also allows me to move backward to Taggard's earlier concerns with the metaphysical poetry tradition and the poetry of Emily Dickinson. The chapter ends with Taggard's transporting the classed articulations of Calling Western Union to the field of music and her interest in African American cultural practices. Chapter Four looks at Margaret Walker's award winning first book, For My People. I explore how Walker's early years in Depression era Chicago, and her embrace of a Eurocentric male left tradition, complicate the moving verse she composes about the rural black south. I look at the influences of Richard Wright and her radical associations on the W.P.A., as they shape her militant perspectives about black labor, which she in turn shapes in her poems. I also examine some of her own essays and reminiscences to further discuss her development of a radical black consciousness.

Each poet would have described her writing through a different vocabulary; therefore I would like to briefly comment on terminology. I use a variety of terms for the subgenre that I discuss in this study: socially engaged verse, political poetry, revolutionary verse, class-conscious poetry, committed writing, radical, feminist poetry. I find these terms both satisfactory and unsatisfactory. The poets who are a part of this study are diverse in almost every way except that they all wrote poems that suggest the dynamic relationship that language has to social struggle. The

vocabulary we use in literary studies to describe the works we encounter is often the product of fashion. To suggest the unfixity of terminology I use a variety of descriptive terms. I also want to write a readable criticism; my dissertation and its subjects, and the desire to maintain a social and political dialogue within literary studies, brings me outside current fashion. The complicated language of post-modernity, while creating a number of important new ways of describing literary practice, has also been used to shroud the very real social conditions about which a variety of writers wrote. In describing the political visions and personal as well as public desires of poets like Ridge Tagggard, and Walker, I must not sacrifice the importance of creating a political practice to linguistic play and artifice. Lola Ridge, Genevieve Taggard, and Margaret Walker have been placed outside the modern American poetry canon because they desired to express a political subjectivity in their work, while rejecting perhaps more "fashionable" aspects of modernism. Perhaps I, as well, go against current literary fashion to give these women the critical attention they deserve.

Chapter Two

I. Writing the Radical Body of Modernism: Politics and Pain in Lola Ridge's Poetry.

"I'm beginning to realize I'm **without dogma**
except what I painfully construct for myself."

(Lola Ridge in a letter to anarchist
friend, Leonard Abbott—late 1910s).¹

The above statement, though not intended for public record, provides a useful introduction to this discussion of Lola Ridge, the once influential feminist and radical whose work I want to recover. Born in Dublin in 1873 and raised in New Zealand and Australia, where she studied painting, Ridge's early years in New York were spent in anarchist circles. She worked as an organizer for the Ferrer Association, established in New York by followers of Francisco Ferrer, a Catalan education reformer. Ferrer, whom the Spanish government executed in 1909 during a purge against anarchist activity in Catalonia, was an advocate of liberatory education and began a series of "freedom schools" in Spain. Ridge helped found the Ferrer Association's magazine, Modern School, which was named for the movement as it had been more commonly known, and edited its first issue.² Ridge, in this private caveat, suggests the complicated nature of any attempt to set down any rules that would smoothly link radical political activity to the practice of poetry. She is a poet

¹ letter in the Carl Zigrosser papers, Van Pelt Library, University of Pennsylvania

² In the same letter to Abbot from which the above quote is taken, Ridge complains of the direction in which she feared the magazine was heading: "I have just read the new Modern School from cover to cover, and am surprised and disappointed by the semi-political, quasi-radical tone of the greater part of it."

associated with both modernist and populist literary movements. Thus she wears two writing identities in a culture that acknowledges and canonizes only one. Importantly, the above remark suggests that Ridge is aware that dogma is not the stuff that great art is made of and also describes the poet's understanding of the conflict between aesthetic practice and the social life that shapes it. It shows how political "dogma" is nonetheless a part of this poet's identity. She cannot construct her "self" without it, yet it must be done—"painfully."³

In an early poem, "Submerged" from her first collection The Ghetto and Other Poems (1918),⁴ Ridge confronts this paradoxical negotiation between the self and some set of rules for negotiating the social world inscribing it. She chides herself for knowing only "Safe, plumbed places," acknowledging that what she really desires is to "dive \ Into the unexplored deeps of me—" and to "Delve and bring up and give \

3

Importantly, in a later quote printed in Living Authors, a reference book published in the early thirties, Ridge connects the political statement to her poet's task of revealing and representing one's deepest emotions. "Let anything that burns you come out whether it be propaganda or not...I write about something that I feel intensely. How can you help writing about something you feel intensely?" (341)

4

Lola Ridge's literary career was comparatively brief. She published her first book when she was forty-five years old, and published five collections of poems in total. She followed The Ghetto with Sun Up in 1920, Red Flag in 1927; Firehead, a book length verse poem about the crucifixion, and essentially an allegory on the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, was published in 1929. Her last book, Dance of Fire, appeared in 1935. At the time of her death in May of 1941, she was at work on another book length verse poem exploring history, pre-history, and violence. To my knowledge, only a few fragments remain of this last work. All of Ridge's books to date are out of print; however, the National Poetry Foundation at the University of Maine is preparing an edition of her collected poems, edited by Elaine Sproat, who is also working on a biography of Ridge.

All that is submerged, encased, unfolded..." The desire expressed in this thirteen line poem, like the admission to Abbott, divulges a complicated set of requirements for the radical woman poet. The "safe, plumbed places" of the poet's "own shallows" need to be challenged in order for her to express her own subjectivity and agency.

However, she must also ask herself whether that which is "submerged, encased, unfolded," in short, buried inside the unconscious—"the unexplored deeps of me" is the only place where a woman poet can exist? Considering the significant number of poems Ridge wrote on purely "political" subjects: lynchings, racially motivated murders, wrongful imprisonments and executions, she also suggests that these "safe...places," for a certain kind of political writing, are resisted by complicating them with the "deeps of me" that continually embrace the colonized bodies and spirits of working women and men. However, it is not clear exactly what Ridge means when she writes of the "deeps" in her and whether they can transcend the purely personal. Possibly she would agree with Carolyn Forché, writing at least three quarters of a century later:

The distinction between the personal and the political gives the political realm too much scope and too little scope; at the same time, it renders the personal too important and not important enough. If we give up the dimension of the personal, we risk relinquishing one of the most powerful sites of resistance. The celebration of the personal, however, can indicate a myopia, an inability to see how larger structures of the economy and the state circumscribe, if not determine, the fragile realm of individuality (31).⁵

5

From the introduction of Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness. Forché's work underestimates the complicated role gender plays in what she, and other contemporary writers and critics, have termed the "poetry of witness." This

The little critical access that we have had to Lola Ridge informs us that she was a frail, sickly woman with intense passion and revolutionary zeal. By reading her unjustly neglected writing we become aware of her political commitment and her desire to represent the oppressed and disenfranchised, the martyred and the misunderstood. Very little of Ridge's work could be classified as "personal" yet politically she was an advocate of individual liberty. She was an early proponent of women's rights, children's rights, worker's rights, the rights of blacks, Jews and other immigrant groups, as well as the rights of individuals to go against conventional standards to pursue sexual fulfillment.

For Ridge, much of this painful construction of the political self, suggested in the remark to Leonard Abbott, appears to be in her negotiation, throughout her writing life, of her performance as both a feminist and radical, practicing her art within the now contested terrain of modernism. However, as far as Ridge and the reception of her work is concerned, there is still a problem with collapsing the categories of "personal" and "political" poetics. As a "political" writer, whether she would agree or not, Ridge is said to use her art as a "weapon," (also an instrument that causes pain). Such can be seen in her exhortation to workers: "out of the passion of the red frontiers \ A great flower trembles and burns and glows \ And each of its

collection, international in scope, contains one late poem by the important socialist and feminist poet, Muriel Rukeyser. It also includes Ezra Pound and e.e. cummings as "poets of witness." One wonders if Forche has ever read any of Ridge's poetry.

petals is a people" ("Reveille").⁶ Yet by encoding political subjectivity into her work she places herself against the ruling "dogma" of modernist poetry, "no ideas but in things," which has largely influenced the way American poetry has been both read, taught and theorized.⁷ Moreover, Ridge's aesthetic embrace of the "social body," and the exteriority implied through her representation of political subjectivity, also sets herself against the female lyric tradition, with its emphasis on the private life and the private couple, and what Genevieve Taggard, also a subject of this study, refers to as the "decorative impulse."⁸

I would like to engage this painful construction of the political self as it relates to Ridge as a feminist and radical poet. Lola Ridge in her own time period, and certainly today, is described, if she is mentioned at all, as a "minor" poet; I would like to complicate her "minor" status by exploring the importance of Ridge's vision, and suggesting how her political subject matter resisted the dehumanizing practices of

6

This poem, which appears in Ridge's first collection The Ghetto and Other Poems, appeared in a number of early twentieth century poetry anthologies. To suggest the kinds of mixing of poetry genres that occurred in these early anthologies, as opposed to those that began to appear in the post-war period, "Reveille" was published in anarchist Marcus Graham's Anthology of Revolutionary Poetry, 1929 and Alfred Kreymbourg's collection, Lyric America (1919), which included many poets from the Others, Dial, Poetry, and Little Review circles.

7

This statement is from William Carlos Williams, whom Lola Ridge knew well. I refer to it as "dogma" not to denigrate its sentiments, but to suggest its rhetorical nature. Advice is advice.

⁸ See the introduction to Taggard's Collected Poems: 1918-1938. New York: Harper Brothers, 1938.

early twentieth-century life.⁹ She was in fact so committed to struggles for liberation both in America and abroad that she was either bitterly disparaged or lavishly praised by her contemporaries for using poetry for public advocacy. It is Ridge's own subject position that she embodies with painful trepidation that I will employ to begin my discussion of her, for it is the word "pain" and its many contexts that most aptly describes Ridge's aesthetic practice. Though the quote with which I begin this chapter suggests the emotional pain that comes with the territory of writing modernity and its dehumanizing processes, Ridge also suffered much physical pain throughout her writing life. What concerns me here is how this combination of emotional and physical pain as she understands it is transformed into a poetic practice whose representations often engender poetic subjects as either agents of social change and/or victims of systemic torture.

I am also writing about Ridge as a means of rediscovering her work and re-establishing her importance to contemporary readers who might want to read poetry as a source of social / political inspiration and engagement, and not only for its aesthetic pleasures. Additionally, for those seeking antecedent traditions to, for example, Denise Levertov's post-modern expression against the war in Vietnam, or Carolyn Forché's poem-critiques of U.S. policy in El Salvador, or the numerous black poets

9

Both Michael North and Nellie MacKay in their respective scholarship on the important African American modernist writer, Jean Toomer, note the significance of Ridge's aid to Toomer when he first arrived in New York. Ridge, then an editor of the avant-garde journal Broom, took it upon herself to push Toomer's publication in Broom and to show the young poet around New York, introducing him to the city's modernist scene and scenemakers.

lyrically attacking racism in America, the poetry of Lola Ridge offers such a link. My discussion is organized around how the dynamic of pain is manifested in Ridge's poetry, and I explore a group of poems, quite different in style, which address the physical manifestations of violence: lynching, imprisonment, execution, and labor exploitation. These more overtly "political" poems, discussed within their historical contexts, will be followed, in the second half of this chapter, by an analysis of "The Ghetto," perhaps Ridge's most significant contribution to American letters. This long poem explores community, as well as gender and cultural difference, and will be introduced through some of Ridge's observations on feminism and art. One important consideration in addressing this politics of pain is the dichotomy of the public versus private body, which is evident in such women writers on the left as Meridel LeSeuer and Tillie Olsen as well as Lola Ridge. Though I feel it necessary to begin my readings of Ridge's work with her "public" poems and their articulation of the public body, the private body, including Ridge's own chronically ill one, invariably problematizes my discussion. Moreover, as I point out below, the public is always complicated by the private and vice versa. I am aware that there is a problem of reducing the political in Ridge's poetry through the metaphor of the corporeal body. It must be acknowledged that Ridge, once described by an admirer as "more spirit than body," does not apply any specific Cartesian practice--separating the mind, or spirit, from the body. As I have previously maintained, the painful construction of the political self in her work merges both body and spirit; when she is writing the body, as it is exploited in labor, lynched by racists, imprisoned by politicians, she is

writing the whole person—physical chains are also spiritual chains.

Pain, as a phenomenological construct, must also be complicated. In the area of literary studies, though the text itself is not a critique of "traditional literary texts," Elaine Scarry's The Body in Pain has succeeded in theorizing the complexities of physical pain (especially politically motivated torture) and its representations. Scarry engages ontological questions about one's ability to understand another's physical pain: "pain comes unsharably into our midst as at once that which cannot be denied and that which cannot be confirmed" (4). She further problematizes this contention by maintaining that physical pain "resists objectification in language" (5), obliging us to encounter the difficulty of using language to represent a phenomenon that resists it. She suggests that "the human attempt to reverse the de-objectifying work of pain by forcing pain itself into avenues of objectification is a project laden with practical and ethical consequences" (6). Scarry, nonetheless, presents a "political" thesis in this text (and the one that most interests me) by exploring Amnesty International's reports of torture victims, and by acknowledging that "the poems and narratives of individual artists...record the passage of pain into speech" (9). In fact, Scarry might term what Ridge creates in her poetic articulations of physical pain, as utilizing a language of "agency" (as she terms the language used by Amnesty workers). Moreover, she maintains that Amnesty International's effectiveness in "bring[ing] about the cessation of torture" relies centrally upon its ability to present as well as authenticate the horrors of physical pain and suffering to individuals who have never experienced such pain. In her interest in exploring "the way other persons become visible to us, or cease to

be visible to us," Scarry's articulation of the body in pain indirectly acknowledges a poetic "dogma" like Lola Ridge's determination to resist both linguistic fashion and language's intractability to "communicate the reality of physical (and emotional) pain to those who are not themselves in pain" (9), as well as to give voice to those who have been deliberately and inhumanely silenced.

Though Ridge wants her readers to identify with injustice by depicting the desecration of the human body, the body must first become a spectacle. However, this spectacular "carceral" body is never presented in isolation from the human being in whom it resides. For example, in the poem "Electrocution," from Ridge's 1927 collection Red Flag, the reader must "view the pain" in order to interpret, as did Supreme Court Justices William Brennan and Thurgood Marshall nearly fifty years later, that the death penalty is indeed "cruel and unusual punishment."¹⁰

He shudders...feeling on the shaven spot
 The probing wind, that stabs him to a thought
 Of storm-drenched fields in a white foam of light,
 And roads of his hill-town that leap to sight
 Like threads of tortured silver...while the guards--
 Monstrous deft dolls that move as on a string,
 In wonted haste to finish with this thing,
 Turn faces blanker than asphalted yards.

They heard the shriek that tore out of its sheath
 But as a feeble moan...yet dared not breathe,
 Who stared there at him, arching--like a tree

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In the case of *Furman versus the State of Georgia* (1972), The Supreme Court ruled that the death penalty, even in a murder conviction, was unconstitutional because it violated the Eighth Amendment's protection against "cruel and unusual punishment. Brennan and Marshall wrote the lead opinions. (See U.S. Reports, vol. 408).

When the winds wrench it and the earth holds tight--
 Whose soul, expanding in white agony,
 Had fused in flaming circuit with the night.

This sonnet dramatizes both the "white agony" of the subject and the indifference, or perhaps shame, of the workers who stand by and watch, their "faces blanker than asphalted yards." The reader can be said to witness both the subject's death by electrocution and the guards "who stared there at him," who have become "deft dolls." Ridge adroitly constructs the image of puppets on strings to assert that capital punishment facilitates injustice by sanctioning worker's complicity in the state's executions of other "workers." Indeed though the poem describes the subject's body "arching--like a tree \ When the winds wrench it," Ridge is careful to connect a soul to it. "He shudders" as the electrodes are placed upon his head. "The probing wind that stabs him to a thought" suggests the subject's conscious confrontation with the "flaming circuit." He is aware of his imminent death and that it will be painful.¹¹

¹¹ Hugo A. Bedau is a philosopher who has written extensively on the death penalty. In his introduction to The Death Penalty in America (1965) he describes the first electrocution. It was New York State that held the honors, installing its first electric chair in 1880. The theory behind the implementation of the electrocution process was that "executing a condemned man by electrocution was superior to executing him by hanging (17)." In 1893 after his lawyer had unsuccessfully argued the eighth amendment protected his client's rights, William Kemmler became the first person put to death by electricity. Bedau's description of the Kemmler execution deserves mention:

Although the execution was little short of torture for Kemmler (the apparatus was makeshift and the executioner clumsy), the **fad** had started. Authorities on electricity...continued to debate whether electrocution was so horrible that it never should have been invented. The late Robert G. Elliot, electrocutioner of 387 men and women, assured the public in his memoirs (1940) that the condemned man loses consciousness immediately with the first jolt of current. The matter remains controversial to this day. Despite the record of bungled executions, the un-

It is worth considering Michel Foucault's discussion of the body as discourse. I am particularly interested in his notion of the "condemned" body, since this is the very body that Ridge describes in many important poems. In historicizing the process by which the condemned body approaches its fate, Foucault maintains it is with the age of the Enlightenment that "the gloomy festival of punishment" began to die out. Torture as a public spectacle, long a practice in western culture, disappeared and was replaced with a legal system that took over the management of disciplinary and penal affairs. Yet torture as a private spectacle, as hidden agenda, developed into its own discursive (and real) practice (*Discipline and Punish* 7-12). This masked character that transformed the penal system into "punishment as a political tactic" (23) is the very justification for bodily torture and exploitation against which Ridge writes. She explores themes of lynching (the hidden ceremony); execution (state sanctioned murder pitting working men against each other); race rebellions, and imprisonment. Two poems, for example, which I will discuss in more detail, "Lullaby," (1918) about two white women who throw a black infant into a burning house during East St. Louis's 1917 race riots, and "Stone Face," (1928) about the erroneous conviction and imprisonment of labor agitator Tom Mooney, explore the "toleration of intolerance" in the sense that while justice hides, racists, and district attorneys with political

avoidable absence of first-hand testimony, and the invariable odor of burning flesh that accompanies every electrocution, most official observers favor the electric chair...(17-18).

NB. Bedau is writing in the early 1960s. Lethal injection has now become the **execution process of choice**, which raises a whole set of new issues about the death penalty and the politics of pain. (bold mine)

ambitions, can do their dirty work undeterred. As a political activist, Ridge no doubt felt she had to write about torture, imprisonment, and the exploitation of labor, in order to "enlighten" her readers about political conditions and how they engender both physical as well as psychological pain. Such a strategy gives noticeable power to her poems.¹² Moreover, prohibitions on public executions did not make the "cruel and unusual punishment" go away. Thus Ridge writes "Electrocution" from the point of view of the condemned man. She rejects the rhetoric that states electrocution is a painless, instantaneous death, more humane than either hanging or firing squad, which, in the United States, it replaced. "Electrocution" challenges even the notion of making a person's death, criminal or not, one that systematically enables interested parties to make wagers on degrees of pain.

This graphic scene metaphorized in "Electrocution" establishes the site for Ridge's intersection of poetry, politics and pain. It presents the condemned body in terms of the spectacle to suggest to her readers the physical and mental cruelty that defines the condemned's space. His shuddering, wrenching, and expanding, as well as his shrieking and moaning give the reader considerable pause. The poem's lyrical sensations hardly promote a passive response. The linguistic bolts and flashes of

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As I use some of Foucault's ideas about the condemned body, I must state his rejection of "agency," which Ridge attempts to utilize in much of her poetry. For Foucault agency is a difficult construct because he believes nothing is free of the totalizing, rationalizing, or conceptualizing domination from which a social agent can exert this allegedly liberating agency. However, Foucault is useful again as I suggest Ridge's thematization in a number of her poems of the abusive power of "disciplinary technology;" not to mention the ultimate fate of the "condemned body" in "Electrocution."

white light and lightening dramatically illuminate the scene, compelling the reader to *look*, participate, *feel* the pain. Ridge also begs the question of how closely, or whether at all, a reader should embrace the horror detailed inside such verses. Yet the poem also incites dialogue on what was then – in the twenties when the poem was written – as it is today, a crucial issue of human rights.

The terrible pain and destruction of the human body that is Ridge's message in this poem is also metaphorized through another image that she uses in a number of these political poems. She employs an image of absolute aesthetic familiarity, however secularly represented, in Christ's crucifixion.¹³ The line from "Electrocution," "roads of his hill-town that leap to sight," intimates Golgotha, the hill on which the Crucifixion took place. Of course if one wants to discuss the body in pain as it is fetishized—made a spectacle, Christ's crucified corpse needs no further introduction. Though mystical allusions, such as "storm-drenched fields in a white foam of light," equate execution with conflagration, Ridge is not concerned with Christ's body as it is embraced and contemplated in Christian ritual. She is interested in refiguring the martyred body through its symbolic subjectivity as another politicized body in pain.

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In 1929 Ridge published Firehead, a book length poem about the Crucifixion. The poem, inspired by the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, was written at Yaddo in six weeks. In fact, Ridge was a significant literary spokesperson in the defence of Sacco and Vanzetti. Her reading of Christ's death on the cross with Sacco & Vanzetti deaths in the electric chair refigures Christ as our most famous victim of institutionalized murder. **nb** It appears doubtful that Ridge, who was an anarchist, practiced any religion. Christ for her appears to be a political symbol rather than a religious one.

The "hill-town" as it is articulated in "Electrocution" also appears in one of Ridge's earlier poems, "Frank Little at Calvary" (1918). In this three-part poem, Ridge describes Little's lynching by hired killers of the Anaconda Copper Company. Little, a much admired I.W.W. organizer, who, according to fellow Wobbly Ralph Chaplin, "boasted of being a half-bread"(sic) (195), had come to the aid of a group of striking copper miners in Montana.¹⁴ As suggested by the title, the poem describes Little's life as he is about to become a martyr, his body crucified upon a "Hill." Ridge begins the poem by placing Little under the watchful eye of mine owners whom she later terms "the Lords of the Hill:" "He walked under the shadow of the Hill \ Where men are fed into the fires \ And walled apart... \ Unarmed and alone,..." The hill she refers to is Anaconda Hill, where on June 8th, 1917, about 200 miners working at the Butte Speculator Mine burned to death "2,400 feet below the surface of the earth" (Flynn 230); the company had ignored proper safety regulations. Ralph Chaplin describes the physical violence caused by the mine disaster: "Men trapped on the lower levels clawed at concrete bulkheads with bloody fingers for steel manholes that weren't there as specified by law. Almost half of the bodies were so charred that even their families could not identify them" (210). The poem's ominous tones allow

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For a discussion of Little and the I.W.W. see Ralph Chaplin's autobiography, Wobbly: The Rough-and-Tumble Story of an American Radical, University of Chicago Press, 1948. Little, according to Chaplin and historian Melvyn Dubofsky, symbolizes the body in pain as he travelled from town to town, strike to strike, beaten and left for dead in almost every place he went. As Dubofsky maintains in We Shall Be All, his definitive study of the I.W.W., by the time Little got to Butte, "he was an ailing rheumatic, bearing the vestiges of too many beatings and too many jailings, and hobbling about on crutches as the result of a recently broken leg" (186).

the reader to imagine Anaconda Hill as Golgotha or Calvary and Little another Christ-like labor activist and war resister. In fact, the representation of Christ as a symbol of resistance was a popular trope used by artists and writers in the early decades of this century. For instance, a number of drawings appearing in The Masses during its years of publication (1911-1917) satirized World War I hypocrisy by utilizing Christ's body. George Bellows's "This man subjected himself to imprisonment..." (July 9, 1917) depicts Christ in prison stripes, a crown of thorns on his head and a ball and chain around his ankles. Boardman Robinson's "The Deserter" (July 8, 1916) shows the long haired, white robed Christ before a firing squad consisting of officers from the various warring nations.¹⁵ In a literary example, the forgotten pacifist and poet, Sarah Cleghorn, author of the much anthologized poem of protest against child labor, "The Golf Links," wrote an anti-war poem called "The Poltroon" in which she refigures Christ as a draft resister. Short phrases such as "walled apart" and, to a lesser extent, "Unarmed and alone," stand out in "Frank Little at Calvary." They signify the laboring body as it is entombed in a mine, separated from the collective social body that is also *America*. Little, as he boldly challenges the "Lords of the Hill" by walking beneath its "shadow," becomes *liberator* and Christ-like martyr. Note that Ridge endows Little with almost mystical abilities. He can cause "the silence of wheels," thus signifying his efforts in making the mountains, which have

¹⁵ See Rebecca Zurrier's Art for the Masses: a Radical Magazine and Its Graphics, 1911-1917. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1987.

been *unnaturally* moved by the back-breaking work of laborers, stand still (literally, of course, through his strike tactics). The poem becomes an allegory for the martyrdom of workers as well as a protest against a burgeoning war industry. Ridge maintains the word "hill" as a salient trope throughout this poem.¹⁶ The "H" always capitalized, "Hill" represents two contrasting linguistic signs: "Hill" as the site of a lynching, a crucifixion, a martyrdom, "Hill" as the place where capital designs its harsh and devious practices against labor. In fact the hidden gaze that Ridge articulates in "Electrocution" corresponds to the one represented in this particular poem. Descriptions of the hidden ceremony that is lynching ("Who may know of that wild ride? \ Only the bleak Hill") penetrate five tensely wrought stanzas. "...they covered up their faces \ And crept upon him as he slept..." she informs us. Little's abduction, gruesome by so many accounts, is alluded to through extended metaphor, images of darkness—"a black bridge poised," "the black mask of night," "blind folded

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Whether by Ridge's intention or not, an additional reference surfaces with the word "Hill." Her contemporary readers would have been reminded of another labor activist and Wobbly martyr, Joe Hill, who met a similar fate to Little's. Howard Zinn's characterization of Hill's plight in A People's History of the United States merits mention:

In Novemeber 1915, Joe Hill was accused of killing a grocer in Salt Lake City, Utah, in a robbery. There was no direct evidence presented in the court that he had committed the murder, but there were enough pieces of evidence to persuade the jury to find him guilty. The case became known throughout the world, and ten thousand letters went to the governor in protest, but with machine guns guarding the entrance to the prison, Joe Hill was executed by a firing squad. He had written Bill Haywood just before this: "Don't waste time in mourning. Organize" (327).

street."¹⁷ Hidden also are the bodies of over a hundred dead miners. Though the poem never mentions them, these laboring bodies become intertwined with Little's condemned body, which I maintain is the central articulation of this poem. In fact, as in "Electrocution," Ridge refigures Little through the condemned's gaze. She imagines him confronting a painful, inevitable end that is realized in his torture and lynching:

I know he looked once at America
 Quiescent, with her great flanks on the globe
 And once at the skies whirling above him...
 Then all that he had spoken against
 And struck against and thrust against
 Over the frail barricade of his life
 Rushed between him and the stars...

Ridge's description of America "with her great flanks on the globe," though an allusion to the nation's shape as a continent, is more provocatively a metaphor for the imperialist war in which the United States, as workers and radical intellectuals like

¹⁷ One such account from Stewart Bird, et al, Solidarity Forever: an Oral History of the IWW, is as follows:

On the morning of August 1, 1917, after Little had returned to the Finn Hotel following a speech at a rally held at the local baseball park, he was awakened by six masked men. The vigilantes beat him, then dragged his bound body behind their car on a rope. They drove to a railroad trestle, where he was castrated and hanged by the neck. On his chest was pinned a note reading: "First and Last Warning--3-7-77. D-D-C-S-S-W." The numbers referred to the Montana specifications for a grave: 3 feet wide, 7 feet long, and 77 inches deep. The capital letters stood for the names of other strike leaders. One of the Ds seemed to be a direct warning to Bill Dunne, militant editor of the Butte Bulletin, and the C was directed toward local miner Tom Campbell, a radical opponent of the conservative WFM leadership (128).

Ridge protested with vehemence, had, in full glory, entered.¹⁸ The phrase also metaphorizes the female body. Ridge might also be alluding to the anti-war sentiments of certain World War I era women who confessed that they did not bring forth sons from their loins in order to see them killed in an imperialist war. Little himself had commented upon what he expected from America's entry into World War I:

"War...will mean the end of free speech, free press, free assembly—everything we ever fought for. I'll take a firing squad first" (Chaplin 196). While Little takes a rope instead, fellow Wobbly, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, indeed proves how prescient he was in his articulation of war-time paranoia:

After war was declared a mounting wave of hysteria and mob violence swept the country. It was **not** shared by the vast majority of American people who became increasingly intimidated. Printed signs were tacked up in public places: "Obey the law and keep your mouth shut!" signed by Attorney General Gregory. The victims of mob violence were varied — Christian ministers, Negro and white, advocates of peace on religious, moral or political grounds: Socialists, IWWs, members of the Non-Partisan League, which was strong among farmers in the Middle West; friends of Irish freedom, and others. Some individuals, both men and women, who made chance remarks on war, conscription or sale of bonds, were tarred and feathered, beaten sometimes to

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Europe went to war in 1914, after the assassination of archduke Francis Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary by Gavrilo Princip, a Serbian Nationalist. The war had been mostly precipitated by the imperialist and territorial struggles of Germany, France, Great Britain, and the Austro-Hungarian empire. The United States remained neutral. However, when a German submarine sunk the ship *Lusitania* and 128 U.S. citizens died, the U.S. began to rethink its policy of non-intervention. As Germany made submarine advances against British sea control, the U.S. broke off relations with the nation. In April 1917, it entered the war. Anti-war intellectual Lola Ridge would no doubt have argued that the U.S. entered the war because there was money to be made from it; her nick-name for war was "the male dance." The war ended in November of 1918. A conservative estimate of the total war dead is about ten million, and 20 million wounded.

insensibility, forced to kiss the flag, driven out of town, forced to buy bonds, threatened with lynching (229).

Ultimately for Ridge, the silencing of Little, and the "frail barricade" formed by his body, signify the silencing of all radicals—poets too—and thus directing the "quiescent" gaze of the masses upon the world powers as they attempt to reshape "the globe." Moreover, Ridge encodes her text with metallic images that suggest the all too menacing presence of armaments: "copper, insensate," "clogged windows of arsenals...", "long sentient fingers in the copper \ chips...\ Gleaming metallic and cold." Thus the poem, both literally and figuratively, "reflects" the war industry, especially as it is challenged by Little's activism and by the IWW's work stoppage campaigns. Moreover, as Flynn reminds us, it was the effectiveness of the IWW, ("some 50,000 lumber workers in the Northwest and 40,000 copper miners in Montana, Arizona and New Mexico were on strike at one time during 1917"), that made it the target of mob violence as well as governmental censure from which it never quite recovered (230). Ridge, in fact, ends her poem with sarcasm:

Wheels turn;
The laden cars
Go rumbling to the mill,
And Labor walks beside the mules...
All's Well with the Hill!

In addition to announcing the poet's anti-capitalist sentiments, the rather ironic tone of these final lines suggests the poet's recognition that this defeat is a familiar aspect of social struggle. The "wheels" silenced under Little's power are no match for the giant machinations of the Hill, and so must, once again "turn."

A month before Little's murder there was a savage massacre of another sort in

East St. Louis, Illinois. Like the deaths at the Butte Speculator Mine, the riots in East St. Louis were related to war-time labor disputes coupled with war-time hysteria. However, these deaths had a racial dimension to them; white workers maimed and killed black workers.¹⁹ Predatory mobs laid siege to the black inhabitants of East St. Louis. Some of the town's black citizens had lived there for many years, many others were newcomers--job seekers migrating from southern towns where men earned eighty cents a day and women fifty cents a week. The three dollars an hour the men could make in the *slaughterhouses* of East St. Louis and St. Louis--its twin across the river--and the dollar and a half per week the women could make in the service sector, seemed like inconceivable fortunes by southern standards. Ridge's poem "Lullaby," though written as an angry response to the massacre as a whole, voices rather a smaller, but no less horrific, episode of the riots. A parenthetical note at the end of the poem informs us: "(An incident of the East St. Louis Race Riots, when some

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I do not have the space here to discuss the complicated relationship between white and black workers during World War I or the general period of labor radicalism. However, DuBois and Gruening provide some background on the labor disputes that gave rise to the riots. Unskilled 'white labor' disappeared during war time, as scores of foreign born white laborers were deported; cities like East St. Louis experienced labor shortages. Between black migration north in search of higher wages and strikes in the meat packing industry, there was a continual supply of black labor ready for work once performed exclusively by white workers (220). Moreover, DuBois would write a rather Marxian response later in "Of Work and Wealth" published in the 1920 collection *Darkwater*: "how may we justly distribute the world's goods to satisfy the necessary wants of the mass of men[?]" "If the white workingmen of East St. Louis felt sure that Negro workers would not and could not take the bread and cake from their mouths, their race hatred would never have been translated into murder. If the black workingmen of the South could earn a decent living under decent circumstances at home, they would not be compelled to underbid their white fellows" (99).

white women flung a living colored baby into the heart of a blazing fire.)"

Yet before examining the poem, I would like to take a look at the riots that inspired Ridge to write it, particularly so, because in my thinking about Ridge as a poet neglected by most literary historical records, and this powerful poem that has accompanied her in her neglect, I find that the East St. Louis massacre is itself a buried 'moment' in American history. By today's standards of violence, in which nothing appears so disconcerting, where the most gruesome torture or brutal act can be either shrugged off with indifference and/or fetishized to the point that we become oblivious or inured to it, the events of the East St. Louis riots still seem shocking. It is not known whether Ridge would have followed accounts of the riot in the black press, but the outrage tacitly expressed in her poetic articulation emulates the enraged attention writers like W.E.B. DuBois gave to it. DuBois and journalist Martha Gruening, writing on the East St. Louis riots in the NAACP journal, The Crisis, (September, 1917) attest to the pervasiveness of racial hatred in war-time America. Moreover, they allow us to witness the complexities of working class relations through depictions of the pernicious behavior of white men, women and children against their black neighbors.²⁰

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A particularly important connection to war-time politics that DuBois and Gruening make is their comparison of the reports of German terror abroad to the activities of whites in East St. Louis. They write: "In all the accounts given of German atrocities, no one, we believe, has accused the Germans of taking pleasure in the sufferings of their victims. But these rioters combined business and pleasure. These Negroes were "butchered to make" an East St. Louis "holiday"" (220-21). **nb** Ironically, according to DuBois' biographer David Levering Lewis, DuBois ultimately supported the United States' entrance into the war along with the participation of African American soldiers

DuBois and Gruening begin their investigation of the riots beneath a photograph of the body in pain. A dazed black man attempts to lift himself from the ground near street car tracks. As viewers would discover later in the text, he has probably been forcibly removed from the street-car by a white mob and beaten until unconscious. DuBois and Gruening introduce us to "The Massacre of East St. Louis:"

On the 2nd of July, 1917, the city of East St. Louis in Illinois added a foul and revolting page to the history of all the massacres of the world. On that day a mob of white men, women and children burned and destroyed at least \$400,000 worth of property belonging to both whites and Negroes; drove 6,000 Negroes out of their homes; and deliberately murdered, by shooting, burning and hanging, between one and two hundred human beings who were black (219).

Using regional press coverage, a letter from the secretary of a local labor union, interviews, as well as the personal testimonies of observers and victims, DuBois and Gruening create a fervid excoriation of the twenty-four hour ordeal. Indeed the accounts of beatings, shootings, hangings are too numerous to record. Eventually the random violence was completed with arson, while police, and the state militia that had been called in, refused to intervene and, in some instances, actively participated. It is with the torching and burning of houses inhabited by blacks as well as the aggressive participation of women that brings me back to Ridge's poetic response to this tragedy, for "Lullaby" singles out the terrible acts of white women, further complicating the presence of the body, pain, and politics in her poetry.

Ridge's focus on white women's complicity in racist war-time hysteria is of

because he hoped this show of patriotism would help grant *full citizenship* to blacks later on. He was wrong. (itals mine).

course grounded in her decision to construct a lullaby.²¹ The poem employs traditional aspects of prosody in both structure and tone. Eight quatrains of abab rhyming couplets rock the reader to the lullaby's classical rhythms. But then, Ridge, in an ironic and ambiguous turn, subverts the anticipated mother's song into a racist's chant:

Rock-a-by baby, woolly and brown...
 (There's a shout at the door an' a big red light...)
 Lil' coon baby, mammy is down...
 Han's that hold yuh are steady an' white...

Here Ridge complicates both the idealized vision of motherhood inscribed in the lullaby with the silenced black woman's voice; the woman's murderers speak in her place, appropriating her dialect, as they throw her child into a fire they have set with the aid of their husbands and children. The real shock is that the white women rock the baby and sing to it before they kill it.

"Lullaby" also renders the body in pain through the trope of the innocent black child victimized by the enraged hands of white women. These white women, in addition to being the poem's speakers, inhabit the corrupt space that Ridge associates

²¹ Coincidentally, the poem also recalls a famous, and very disturbing, nursery rhyme from the Mother Goose collection:

Lady bird, lady bird
 Fly away home.
 Your house is on fire,
 Your children all gone.

All except one
 And that's little Ann
 And she has crept under
 The warming pan.

with white men and the white male gaze of the "Lords of the Hill." In fact, Ridge indirectly reminds us of the familiar exploited black female body—the caretaker of white children—as she removes all nurturing qualities from the white women who are here represented as the slayers of the black child. Other persecuted bodies, the child's parents for example, are also described: "Daddy's run away;" "mammy's in a heap \ By her own fron' door in the blazin' heat." The evisceration of the East St. Louis black community is also symbolically represented through the image of charred, innocent bodies. Yet the body in pain is most explicitly recognized in the tortured infant. Through this representation Ridge suggests that this child's body, as it is thrown into the fire, becomes an important signifier — a call for resistance to racist oppression.

By voicing in playful tones the vicious acts of individuals whose hatred has festered as if it were itself a diseased body, Ridge allows us to see intolerance as a game without end. In fact the language of games is repeated throughout the poem in lines such as "the singin' flame an' the gleeful crowd," or "Han's that are wonderful, steady an' white! \ To toss up a lil' babe, blinkin an' brown..." Thus the poem's architecture, or I should say "playground," subverts the innocence of games associated with the nursery rhyme, and reminds readers that the mob violence inciting the poem's production is articulated by racists too as a form of 'play.' Note, for example, descriptions of the sport-like mood that DuBois and Gruening appropriate in their Crisis essay. They locate a riot report from the St. Louis Globe-Democrat that details the atmosphere of amusement surrounding the white mobs as they set fire to

the black homes:

They pursued the women who were driven out of the burning homes, with the idea, not of extinguishing their burning clothing, but of inflicting added pain, if possible. They stood around in groups, laughing and jeering, while they witnessed the final writhings of the terror and pain wracked wretches who crawled to the streets to die after their flesh had been cooked in their own homes (224).

It is interesting to contrast Ridge's indirect response to the atrocity with the graphic intensity that DuBois and Gruening attempt in their journalism. Ridge's commentary on white racism is secured by her focus on one particularly horrific episode that could have the greatest impact upon her audience, in this case the murder of an innocent child by mothers of other children. As with any grisly story produced in a daily newspaper, there is a sensational cast to the above description. DuBois, no doubt, intensified his prose with language that could embellish the aspects of pain in his article in order to excite and well as incite his audience. However, I am interested here in connecting the terrible spectacle described above with Ridge's reconfiguration of the lullaby. Whereas DuBois and Gruening depict the magnitude of war-time hysteria and the racist and/or nationalist sentiments produced in its wake, Ridge's poem localizes the experience by complicating the familiar body of mother\child with the collective body of rage and intolerance produced in times of reaction. I feel it is important to engage Lola Ridge's power as a political poet, and her immense passion and skill by reading a poem like "Lullaby" intertextually with the impassioned prose of political writers such as DuBois. DuBois provides the social and historical background that enriches and expands our knowledge of what it must have been like for poets such as Lola Ridge to remake a "Lullaby" to speak for the cruelty and

injustice of the age in which she lived and wrote.

The lynched body appears again in "Morning Ride," written in 1923, and collected along with "Electrocution" in a section of Red Flag entitled "...under the sun." The poem curiously resembles no other poems that Ridge published; yet its representation of the tortured and slain human corpse is strikingly familiar. "Morning Ride" shows the poet experimenting with form while remaining committed to the expression of a political perspective. Rather than being a direct portrait of a lynching as with "Frank Little at Calvary," "Morning Ride" might be aptly subtitled "Cityscape with Lynching," as it puts a southern lynching in dialogue with the everyday life of the urban working class. Rereading this poem reminds me of a powerful framing technique used by Andrej Wajda in his first film, A Generation. Inspired by Italian neo-realism as well as the expressionist work of the previous generation of artists, Wajda tells the story of some members of a left-wing underground group formed in a Polish factory during the second world war. In one particular scene, a close-up dialogue is framed against a blurred background in which corpses hang from telephone poles. Among many other points of reference, these strung-up bodies signified the ability of fascist ideology to control the everyday means of communication during the Nazi occupation.

The poem contains two pronounced images that offer competing and distracting commentary on modernity. The skyscrapers along the New York city skyline embrace commuters on their way to work, while the newspapers they read, to occupy themselves during their morning ritual, recap a ten year old racially motivated murder.

It recounts the lynching of Leo Frank. Frank was a young Jewish factory manager in Atlanta who, in 1913, was falsely accused of raping and murdering a fourteen year old white female employee. In 1915, while serving a life sentence for the crime he denied committing, Frank was abducted by local Ku Klux Klan members, strung from a tree and executed. Although Ridge here refers to the clearing of Frank's name, which occurred when a janitor confessed to the murder, the state of Georgia did not officially pardon him until 1986 -- 73 years later:

HEADLINES chanting--

y o u t h
l y n c h e d t e n y e a r s a g o
c l e a r e d --

Skyscrapers

seeming still

whirling on their concrete

bases,

windows

fanged--

l e o f r a n k

l y n c h e d t e n

s a y i t w i t h f l o w e r s

w r i g l e y ' s s p e a r m i n t g u m

c a r t e r ' s l i t t l e l i v e r --

lean

to the soft blarney of the wind

fooling with your hair,

look

milk-clouds oozing over the blue

Step Lively Please

Let 'Em Out First Let 'Em Out

did he too feel it on his forehead,

the gentle raillery of the wind,

as the rope pulled taut over the tree

in the cool dawn?

The poem places Ridge in a contradictory critical position, for it embraces as

well as critiques modernist aesthetic engagement with the machine age. On the one hand the poet's typographic experimentation, her appropriation of advertisement as well as the mass transit conductor's voice, gives the poem an aspect of collage. The juxtaposition of advertising slogans, the bus/metro locale, the skyscraper backdrop suggest the influence of Cubism, Futurism and Vorticism—movements that attempted, by means of abstraction, to represent motion. Indeed Ridge complicates the New York skyscraper by representing it along with the body of the Jewish victim of injustice. Symbols of both modernity and industrial capitalism, skyscrapers "seeming still," whirl "on their concrete bases." They emanate a grotesque, distorted quality with their "windows \ fanged—." Ridge redirects the modernist tropes she appropriates in the poem 's narrative movement. Though Frank "lynched ten years ago" is but a headline in the pages passengers turn automatically, Ridge resituates his slain corpse into the active "body" of her text, juxtaposing the "soft blarney of the wind" that mingles with commuters and their daily rituals, with the "gentle raillery of the wind" that the speaker imagines as Leo Frank's final sensation. Ridge reminds her readers that the lively, crowded metropolis, celebrated in what Jurgen Habermas characterizes as the modernist fascination with the "eternally new," and represented in the poem's vocabulary by the variety of verbs ending in "ing," must find itself engaged with Frank's silent corpse, for the text bears its own *strange fruit* swaying in the breeze. Leo Frank's lynched body ultimately forces itself onto the consciousness of subway riders. It signifies the social and political realities that lurk behind the headlines, skyscrapers, and advertising that bind and blind the urban working class in

its daily rituals.

Though the juxtaposition of the whirling skyscrapers with Frank's swaying corpse suggests that Ridge is using modernist montage and collage she is also politicizing the body in pain. Leo Frank's murder must be intricately linked to "everyday life in the modern world," and as she herself once remarked "the machine age of America should by all means be represented but **interpreted**²² not reported."²³ Frank's corpse hence becomes hermeneutically situated as an object that complicates modernist aesthetic representation, which merely describes. There is here a history of injustice and intolerance behind the landscape, or languagescape, rearticulated through the existing tropes of modernist aesthetics.

Yet, to understand Ridge's modernist appropriation of montage and collage in this particular poem, it is important to note that "Morning Ride" was composed soon after Ridge resigned as the American editor of Broom. One the century's earliest and most innovative journals of art and literature, Broom was published in Rome and later in Berlin by Harold Loeb, a wealthy young American expatriate. Ridge's tenure at Broom was brief. She supported the development of a uniquely American aesthetic whereas Loeb, and his European associates, favored the experimental art they encountered in Europe. Moreover, Ridge was far from sanguine about continental, particularly French, influence on American art. As she wrote Loeb, pointing to

²² bold mine

²³ Undated letter, Broom correspondence, Harold Loeb papers, Princeton University Library.

France as the leader of "the world's fashion:" "what real growth shall we foster if we squeeze the feet of this giant child into a french shoe?"²⁴ In fact, two books, published years later, tell the story of Ridge's Broom period with a kind of pernicious hindsight. As Loeb describes her in his hubristically titled memoir, The Way It Was, "she was...among the moaners whom the machines were tearing apart" (102).

Curiously, this particular statement suggests a reference to Ridge's own body as an object of lynching. Matthew Josephson, who became a European editor at the time of Ridge's resignation, writes the following: "[she] declared herself opposed to...giving reflection to the Machine-Age culture of our time, holding that artists would survive only by fighting against the machine and capitalism" (Life Among the Surrealists 231).²⁵ Elsewhere Ridge has written about blast furnaces and Broadway, in which the body as laboring machine attempts to transform the objects it produces. Iron

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(letter of March, 1922, Harold Loeb papers, Princeton University Library). Much of Ridge's correspondence with Loeb suggests an unusually zealous devotion to getting the journal out and doing it right. The correspondence also suggests a fairly smooth reciprocal relationship between the two; however, Ridge and Loeb eventually came to loggerheads over the material Ridge collected for an "All American number" in which she resigned on Loeb's insistence that Gertrude Stein be included. Ridge informed Loeb that Stein "has only an occasional gleam—it mostly blah! blah!...In a few years her work will be on the rubbish heap with the rest of the literary tinsel that has fluttered its little day and grown too shabby even for the columns of a daily" (letter of July 11, 1922, Loeb papers). nb. One might argue that Ridge is neglected today on her dislike of Stein alone.

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What is unfortunate is that there is no surviving evidence that records Ridge's actual discussion with Josephson. If his, as well as Loeb's, descriptions are to suffice, ample material in Ridge's own oeuvre suggests she had a more complicated understanding of what technological advancement would ultimately create than either of these accounts can tell us.

smelted by workers becomes "flaming petals" and "fiery blossoms" ("Song of Iron"). The electric light of "Broadway" is celebrated through imagery that also questions its tremendous power: "Light that jingles like anklet chains," "trillions of porcelain \ Vases shattering," "captive light", "a huge serpent...\Over the night prostrate," equate Broadway with a seducing, ensnaring authority associated with a rising consumer capitalism. For Ridge, the human body frequently appears in thrall to modernist machinery; the lone corpse of a Frank Little or a Leo Frank becomes more than a symbol, but serves as a trope of resistance.

Lola Ridge's own body, throughout her career, played an important part in her poetics of resistance. In the mid 1920s she was active, along with tens of thousands of individuals the world over, in the defence of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, the Italian anarchists erroneously charged, tried and executed for a payroll robbery in South Braintree, Massachusetts in which a paymaster and his guard were shot and killed. Hundreds of pieces of literature were produced internationally in response to the two men's imprisonment, trial and execution, which took place in an atmosphere of post-war conservatism and xenophobia. Ridge contributed a poem, "Two in the Death House" to America Arraigned, an anthology, edited by radicals Lucia Trent and Ralph Cheney, composed exclusively of poems about the Sacco and Vanzetti case. Many of the works and reminiscences of this particular moment, such as Maxwell Anderson's Winterset tended to sentimentalize the two immigrants. Yet noted historian of Anarchism, Paul Avrich, writes in his book Sacco and Vanzetti: the Anarchist Background, that both men were "ultra-militants, believers in armed

retaliation." Both carried guns and were involved to some degree in the plot to kill Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, the man responsible for the 1919-1920 deportation of hundreds of foreign born radicals, including Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman (159-160). Ridge was never a pacifist and probably did not support excessive use of violence, though her later poems show an interest in understanding the historical uses of violence. In fact, in a 1923 letter, written when she was at Yaddo, to husband David Lawson, a Glasgow born anarchist engineer, she expresses some of her thoughts on political culture at the time of Mussolini's rise to power:

I'm not a pacifist and am an individualist and I know individuals will always rule, no matter what the society...even in a democracy... Just now I think the communists are more fit to rule than any other group, but I tremble to think of the result once the greater part of the world has become communist. When Ibsen said "The majority is always wrong" it stood for then, today and a hundred years hence.²⁶

The Sacco and Vanzetti trial and execution as a vicious miscarriage of justice, as well as one of the most famous legal cases of this century, has been examined, from a number of perspectives, by writers, critics and historians.²⁷ Harvard law professor Edmund Morgan and Louis Joughin, a literary critic and professor of

²⁶ Letter in the Lola Ridge Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College Library.

²⁷

Some explorations on the case are Felix Frankfurter, The Case of Sacco and Vanzetti (1927); Francis Russell, Tragedy in Dedham: The Story of the Sacco and Vanzetti Case (1962); Herman Ehrmann, The Case That Wouldn't Die, (1969). Upton Sinclair's Boston (1928) is a "documentary novel" of the case. Sacco and Vanzetti in their own words can be found in The Letters of Sacco and Vanzetti, Marion Denham Frankfurter and Gardner Jackson, eds. (1928).

English at the New School for Social Research found it necessary to respond to "the case that wouldn't die," by examining both the trial records and the staggering number of literary records written both before and after the execution. While Morgan and Joughin's text, The Legacy of Sacco and Vanzetti, reconfirms the Sacco and Vanzetti case as perhaps the twentieth century's worst miscarriage of justice, it also offers an ironic suggestion about Lola Ridge's importance as a social poet. In 1948 when The Legacy of Sacco and Vanzetti first appeared, Ridge was on her way to join her fellow protesters and other literary radicals into history's dust-bin, Ridge is described as a poet whose "...volumes of verse are not widely known to the general public, but is difficult to believe that this relative obscurity can continue indefinitely" (389).²⁸ On another ironic note, Louis Joughin uses the same kind of narrow, literary criteria to praise her that the critical history responsible for burying Ridge has traditionally maintained. In order to sift through 144 poems on the case that he was able to locate, divides them into categories -- "very good literature, the middle ground, and the hopelessly bad" -- further adding that the "extreme polarity of the first and third classes should obviate too personal an evaluation" (376). Joughin narrows the poems down to twelve that are most noteworthy, two of these by Lola Ridge, "Two in the Death House," which appeared in America Arraigned, and "Three Men Die," which I

²⁸ Joughin writes at the end of his chapter on the Sacco and Vanzetti poetry that though other poets wrote about the case with equal force, none "gives any sign of having worked at his (sic) material for as many hours and with as intense a desire for final artistic perfection." He continues with a claim that Ridge's poems "almost certainly deserve a permanent place among the chief American poems" (391-392).

shall discuss shortly.²⁹

I am particularly interested in Ridge's use of her own body to protest the injustice, as well as in her poetic representation of the physical and psychological torment the two men endured. In fact, Sacco's and Vanzetti's small, short, immigrant, working class bodies were emblems for Ridge of the seemingly pathological hatred of foreigners and "foreign" ideas expressed by the courts and the establishment at that particular moment (one which I assert is not all that different in outlook from the moment in which I write these words). Ridge vigorously protested the imprisonment of these two innocent men whose anarchist principles she, in many ways, shared. While Ridge's main medium of activism was her public poetry, Sacco and Vanzetti had been widely involved in labor strikes and other forms of political agitation, including extensive anti-war work. They had been previously under police suspicion, probably because they were supporters of the important anarchist newspaper Cronaca Sovversiva, edited by the anarchist leader Luigi Galleani.³⁰ Yet Ridge

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The other poems are by Witter Bynner, Countee Cullen, Edna St. Vincent Millay, E. Merrill Root, Malcolm Cowley, Arthur Davison Ficke and James Rorty. Interestingly the other "best work in verse, besides Ridge, was the poem "For the Honor of Massachusetts" by a 'regional' poet, Brent Dow Allinson. Allinson's poem appeared respectively in Locomotive Engineers Journal, La Follette's Magazine, and a religious publication, Unity.

30

Luigi Galleani (1861-1931) was a leading agitator and propagandist of the Italian anarchist movement; he had considerable influence over Italian workers in both Italy and the United States. Galleani spurned individualistic anarchism in favor of a proletarian based anarcho-communism. He also believed that social revolution could only come about through violence -- through complete destruction of the existing social order. Galleani's main mouthpiece for his ideas was Cronica Sovversiva, which

thought the case important enough to put her body on the line. She was arrested by Boston police at the protest and vigil held for the two men at the Charlestown prison on the evening of their execution, August 22nd, 1927. She had joined the rather sizeable defence committee set up on their behalf along with diverse intellectuals such as Malcolm Cowley, John Dos Passos, Mike Gold, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Scott Nearing, Dorothy Parker, Katherine Anne Porter, and Mary Heaton Vorse. Indeed Ridge's bodily presence at this sizeable protest was still vivid fifty years later to co-participant Katherine Anne Porter. Porter's 1977 memoir, The Never Ending Wrong, while excessive in its Cold-War liberal apologia for Thirties' literary radicalism, (she seems to have found it necessary to confess the sins of her radical youth on every page), points to Ridge's defiant body as police on horseback attempted to disperse the crowd of assemblers. "Most of the people," Porter writes,

moved back passively before the police, almost as if they ignored their presence; yet there were faces fixed in agonized disbelief, their eyes followed the rushing horses as if this was not a sight they had expected to see in their lives. One tall, thin figure of a woman stepped out alone, a good distance into the empty square, and when the police came down at her and the horse's hoofs beat over her head, she did not move, but stood with her shoulders slightly bowed, entirely still. The charge was repeated again and again, but she was not to be driven away. A man near me said in horror, suddenly recognizing her, "That's Lola Ridge" (43-44).³¹

he published from 1903 to 1918. In the summer of 1919, during the famous red scare, Galleani was deported. A compelling portrait of him can be found in Paul Avrich's Anarchist Portraits. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1988).

31

The Never Ending Wrong, Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1977. Porter provides an intriguing portrait of Ridge here, and the incident described has been confirmed by other writers, for example, Kay Boyle in her memoir Being Geniuses Together.

It is this image of Ridge and her protester's body that I imagine as I read one of the poems she created in response to this complicated historical moment. "Three Men Die," a long poem in five sections, appeared in her last book, Dance of Fire (1935). Rather than rendering a narrative of events, the poem, as Harriet Monroe said of Firehead, is a "meditation"—and I would add, a meditation on the body in pain.³² It is a difficult poem. Ridge constructs her memorial to Sacco and Vanzetti as victims of an entrenched, intolerant political establishment through a heteroglossic languagescape that encodes angry protest, police violence and legal corruption. She recreates the sense of trembling, anger, helplessness, and a myriad of other physical and emotional sensations endured by the crowd of defenders, herself included. The poem's unusual, irregular rhyme scheme embraces the contemporary drama centering upon the seven-year long trial as well as suggests the formal tropes of biblical and

However, later in the passage, perhaps for dramatic effect, she inaccurately tells us that Ridge "had not long to live." Lola Ridge died in the spring of 1941, thirteen and a half years after the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti.

32

See footnote 13 for information on Firehead. Monroe was founder and editor of Poetry: A Magazine of Verse, to which Ridge contributed a number of poems and reviews. Not only was Poetry an influential journal throughout Ridge's career, it was particularly supportive of women poets. Monroe begins her review of Firehead with the following commendation:

Lola Ridge has always been fascinated by the heroic. Courage, protest, revolt—these she has celebrated in her poems and practiced in her life, impatient of humdrum, of the neatly organized processes of ordinary society. The exceptional allures her, the tragic, the sublime; in the utmost reaches of these she has full faith, reserving her doubts for incredibilities at the other end of the scale—for humanity's littleness, meanness (36).

previous interest in the Crucifixion. Moreover, it seems a bizarre coincidence that allows Ridge to remind her readers of a significant "historical" moment, (or as she suggests, an "old myth") in which "three men die." Christ is crucified with a thief (like Madieros) and another common criminal—"one of each hand."³⁴ Just as one might interpret crucifying Christ along with two criminals as a means of denying the significance of his revolutionary activities, one might argue that electrocuting Madieros along with Sacco and Vanzetti allowed Judge Thayer to send the message that these men were criminals also, and nothing more.

Ridge creates a tribute to Sacco by using "death house" as he does in his letter to his son. She also indirectly reminds us, as do Sacco's words, of the physical and emotional damage that prisons cause to those incarcerated in them. In fact, the idleness of prison life for Sacco and Vanzetti seemed an ironic blow to these working men whose identities were formed through the fact of their labor.³⁵ Both even went

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Ridge is not alone in connecting Sacco and Vanzetti's execution with Christ's crucifixion. Joughin cites a number of poems that employ this trope. Visual artists also created comparisons with the crucifixion. Ben Shahn in his 23 painting series exhibited in 1932 under the title, "The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti," remarked the following:

I got to thinking about the Sacco-Vanzetti case. They'd been electrocuted in 1927, and in Europe of course I'd seen all the demonstrations against the trial...Ever since I could remember I'd wished that I'd been lucky enough to be alive at a great time—when something big was going on, like the Crucifixion. And suddenly I realized I was! Here I was living through another crucifixion. Here was something to paint (qtd. in Pohl 12).

35

"Denied the usual privilege of physical labor because of a technical rule governing the handling of unsentenced prisoners charged with murder, Sacco discovered that

on hunger strikes, Sacco, at first by himself, midway through their incarceration, and the two of them together, one month before their execution.³⁶ When Sacco and Vanzetti appeared in the courtroom, they were forced to sit hand-cuffed inside a prisoner's dock—a wrought iron cage that exposed only their heads. A famous photograph of the trial shows them inside this "cage," looking tired and well beyond their thirty-something years. The artist Ben Shahn was so moved by this newspaper photo that he painted a gouache of it, "Sacco and Vanzetti: In the Courtroom Cage," as part of a series that he made of the trial and execution.

In addition to the spiritual evocation of martyrdom that I mentioned earlier, the opening lines of "Three Men Die" suggest engagement with the genres of memoir and reportage produced during the case. Journalistic observation is evoked as Ridge recalls how the gaze of "the workers of all lands that day \ looked toward the death house." Ridge sets a tone, both angry and decisive, that informs her readers of the case's magnitude, insisting that somehow the bodies of all working people, all individuals who desired social justice, were merged into the same giant tableau,

daily exercises in his small cell were a poor substitute" (Denman Frankfurter and Jackson 5).

36

In March of 1923, Sacco went on a hunger strike to protest Judge Thayer's repeated belligerence toward the request of a new trial (Flynn 326). "On July 8, [1927] the Lowell advisory committee interviewed Sacco and Vanzetti in prison. Soon thereafter, in protest against the attitude of the Governor towards defense witnesses, as conveyed to him by Mrs. Sacco and other visitors, Vanzetti joined Sacco in a hunger strike. It lasted fifteen days, until the threat of forcible feeding made him stop" (Denman Frankfurter and Jackson 292).

moving as one dynamic force. The image of a secular, working class call to prayer comes to mind; however, instead of Mecca, one faces Boston's Charlestown Prison where two innocent bodies prepare for electrocution. The Sacco and Vanzetti case became famous around the world. Radicals, working people and immigrants expressed their solidarity by instigating forms of public agitation in great cities such as London, Paris, Leningrad, Mexico City and Buenos Aires; even important Italian senators and diplomats tried to intervene on the men's behalf. The international scope of the protests eventually persuaded Massachusetts Governor, Alvan T. Fuller to consider giving the two executive clemency.³⁷ Radical journalist, Mary Heaton Vorse, in her memoir of her years spent covering the labor movement, recalls the intensity and sense of solidarity the trial took on in faraway France:

The night they suffered their death I was in Paris. All working-class Paris paraded in protest. The city was tense as though it were something that was happening within the borders of France. There had been small riots and arrests in the demonstrations held in front of the American Embassy. We sat around in groups feeling the hour of doom approaching, feeling the horrible anguish mounting up within us as though a wave of grief had swept over us, the same wave that at the same moment was causing the massing of emotion in Union Square and the assembly of great crowds in Boston (Footnote to Folly, 339).

³⁷ Robert D'Attilio's entry on the Sacco and Vanzetti Case in The Dictionary of the American Left describes the effect of Fuller's consideration of clemency:

[Fuller] appointed an advisory committee, the "Lowell Committee," so called because its most prominent member was A. Lawrence Lowell, president of Harvard University. The committee, in a decision that was notorious for its loose thinking, concluded that the trial and judicial process had been just 'on the whole' and that clemency was not warranted. It only fueled controversy over the fate of the two men, and Harvard, because of Lowell's role, became stigmatized, in the words of one of its alumni, as "Hangman's House" (669).

Not only does Vorse's reminiscence suggest that the electro-magnetic volts that shocked the bodies of Sacco and Vanzetti were also felt by the French working class as a collective body, but in similar fashion transcontinental 'waves of emotion' consolidated groups of outraged protesters from Rome to Paterson. In fact, the process of reading "Three Men Die" (at least for this reader) might be described as tension wrought, the sense of "anguish mounting up" as one moves carefully through the text. Probably Ridge hoped that "a wave of grief" would wash over her readers as they struggled through this long, intense poem.

As I have noted, Lola Ridge did not only contribute poetry to the international defence of the two Italian anarchists, but she was physically present at protests on their behalf -- the most memorable of these was the one at the Charlestown prison the night of their execution. Ridge rather tacitly describes her own participation as "one who had been there" in the third section of "Three Men Die." Yet Ridge's characterization of herself in the fight to reverse the death sentences of the two men seems insignificant in contrast to the way she is romanticized by Katherine Anne Porter in the description I cited from The Never Ending Wrong. Porter presents Ridge as a "spectacle" -- the lone figure who stands unflinchingly against the threat of police brutality--, whereas Ridge's depiction implies that she was one of many protesters. The self-effacing poet is more interested in the fate of Sacco and Vanzetti than she is in celebrating her own act of resistance. In this passage, which evokes Walt Whitman's Civil War poem "Drum-Taps," Ridge pairs her own fragile protester's body with the horse's body in its task at riot control. It is the animal's

body that dominates:

Drumbeats of the hooves...so close, so close...that
 one who had been there (and for some quite
 Unbalanced reason did not run...but stood there in the
 hooves' path) had noted
 (Knowing horses) the lead head, straight nose, clean flank,
 Line of the onrushing shoulder, brought to this...and
 feeling the wet foam on his mouth, glimpsed spread
 nostrils and the white
 Fire of the eye, rolling as in agony; one might have seen
 (All in the one beetling moment, there awaiting the falling
 Cataract of the hooves) the great body-rear-swerve and
 plunge sideways
 And the lighting
 strike from the stone...

The close attention to the animal's form brings to mind its uses as "war horse," "work horse," "beast of burden," even the horse attached to Vanzetti's fish cart as he peddled Christmas eels to shoppers--his alibi at the time the robbery and murder took place. Louis Joughin suggests that this necessary "long metaphoric digression" allows Ridge to contrast primitive man's early subduing of the horse in order to "use him proudly," with the animal's physical abuse by mounted police in the service of crowd control (391). The horse is presented as a contorted body with its "spread nostrils," the "white \ Fire of the eye, rolling as in agony," and the "falling \ Cataract of the hooves;" both senses of cataract are implied here--'blindness' and 'waterfall.' The animal is also of "great body," making a "rear-swerve" and a "plunge sideways." She also constructs a clash of performing bodies as, she, in the act of protesting, encounters the horse or horses used in corrupt political performance: "O prancers, of your brave \ Cavortings and your tournaments--to ride down brittle \ bodies that shall bleat \ Once--if the shot feet strike \ out unseen lightnings..." Ridge symbolically

refigures the class divisions in the Sacco and Vanzetti case by representing these animals through several distinct semiotic performances: work horse, police horse and tournament horse. The tacit suggestion the movement of the horse's body makes, as a mocking gesture to the stillness imposed upon Sacco and Vanzetti in their prison cells, is yet another striking reminder of the "carceral" body, the body of the prisoner, as it appears in this poem.

Towards the poem's close, Ridge reconstructs the execution site to which the three men are led and here provides perhaps the most concrete representation in the entire poem of the body in pain: "They led the thief out first," ("trembling"); Then Sacco "came on with his usual tread." He came on "Intrepidly, \ Beneath the arc that on him shed \ A light as white as agony."³⁸ Vanzetti is brought out last and "...fell \ A silence on them." History, news stories, and memoirs about the case all repeat in some way, shape or form Vanzetti's final words before being strapped to the electric chair. "I am an innocent man," they report. Ridge, however chooses to write and

38

Importantly, this "white...agony" is the same descriptive phrase Ridge uses in "Electrocution" to suggest the moment of contact between the volts of electricity and its human subject. Curiously the word agony appears in a much quoted statement Bartolemeo Vanzetti made upon receiving his death sentence. (This statement also appeared in one of Ben Shahn's serigraphs made in 1958):

If it had not been for these thing, I might have live out my life talking at street corners to scorning men. I might have die, unmarked, unknown, a failure. Now we are not a failure. This is our career and our triumph. Never in our full life could we hope to do such work for tolerance, for joostice, for man's onderstanding of man as now we do by accident. Our words--our lives--our pains--nothing! The taking of our lives--lives of a good shoemaker and a poor fish-peddler--all! That last moment belongs to us--that agony is our triumph.

celebrate Vanzetti's working-class body:

He stood there, isolate, a man
 Fleshed heavily, of massive bone,
 With a warm, brooding eye, head thrown
 A little forward in the stoop
 That labor leaves upon its own
 Whose shoulders have held up the world.

With this construction of Vanzetti, the last of the "martyrs" to meet his death in "white agony," Ridge leaves her readers seeing Sacco and Vanzetti as flesh and bone men, "warm" but "isolate." The poem also works out a set of contradictions in terms of how the textual bodies of Sacco and Vanzetti may ultimately be read—and remembered. She has placed classical and biblical tropes throughout the poem, which are used as well in her closing assessments of the two working-class martyrs. Vanzetti, for example, is ordinary, but he is also Atlas, the mythical strong man, "Whose shoulders" hold up the world. She describes both men as unaware of "the sacrament, \Their little nimble hands had poured." Yet she also identifies them "Beneath their armed impertinence, \ The mighty rhythms they had stirred." For Lola Ridge, Sacco and Vanzetti remain men of principle whose beliefs stood trial alongside of them.

If the Sacco and Vanzetti and the Scottsboro cases represent the two most important U.S. trials of the first half of the twentieth century, the trial and conviction of radical labor leader Tom Mooney adds another significant item of judicial misconduct to the history of legal lynchings. Mooney was (dubiously) linked to a 1916 bombing at a San Francisco Preparedness Day rally at which eight people were killed. Mooney and a younger associate, Warren K. Billings, represented to the west

coast legal and business establishment what Sacco and Vanzetti and their anarchist comrades represented on the east coast, militant labor as an active component of American economic life. Thus a conspiracy against them — complete with Pinkerton agents and a long list of paid perjurers and informants — began and the Mooney-Billings case continued for twenty-three years.

At the end of his 500 page study, The Mooney Case, Richard H. Frost sums up by making a rather curious remark: "The Mooney case never inspired novelists or poets," he writes. "The verses of his admirers are best left to oblivion along with Upton Sinclair's "100 Percent" and a play called "Precedent," by Isadore J Golden, a St. Louis lawyer" (488-9). Once again we find the important political and artistic contributions of Lola Ridge buried. Ridge provided a very public contribution to the Mooney defence, but Frost, in typical post-war fashion, appears ignorant of it. Frost's text, published by Stanford University Press in 1968, is the most exhaustive study of the case to date. It is also informed by a Cold-War era stance that interferes with the more complicated relationship the Mooney Case seemed to have had with the Communist Party and its legal arm, the International Legal Defence. This Cold War view point is ironically evident in Frost's ignorance of Ridge's poem "Stone Face:" "The able writers who cared about the case," he writes, "like Sinclair Lewis (whom Ridge found boring) and Dreiser, did not lend their talents. Mooney often called for a Zola, but no Zola ever came" (489).³⁹ "Stone Face," included in Ridge's 1935

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Two other sources I consulted were a biography, The Gentle Dynamiter, (Palo Alto: Ramparts Press, 1983) by Estolv Ethan Ward, a Mooney admirer who was the court

collection, Dance of Fire, was probably written for the Mooney cause during the twenties, after Mooney's death sentence had been commuted to life imprisonment.⁴⁰ Before the poem was formally published in The Nation, it had a radical life on the left-hand side of a large broadside, on the right side of which appeared a photo of Mooney, in stripes, complete with prisoner I.D. number and face showing signs of deteriorating health. This poster travelled across America as a popular form of public protest, affixed onto facades of buildings and steel girders of bridges. It decorated union halls and night school classrooms, all in the hope of raising money on

reporter at the time the Mooney-Billings Case first went to trial, and Hugo Bedau and Michael Radelet's In Spite of Innocence: Erroneous Convictions in Capital Cases, which provides a chapter on the Mooney-Billings case, rereading it in the light of a century's worth of fallacious judicial decisions (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992).

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Langston Hughes, probably the world's best known black writer, also wrote a poem for Mooney. Hughes visited Mooney in prison in 1932 and in that same year The New Masses published his poem "To Tom Mooney." In fact an important, largely ignored fact about Hughes is that he spent most of the 1930s writing radical verses for left-wing magazines. Some of this work has only been recently republished in The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes (Knopf, 1995). As Ridge does at the end of her poem, Hughes makes a dig at the man who repeatedly refused Mooney's request for a pardon:

The workers speak the name:
 Tom Mooney!...
 Until the whole world falls into the hands of
 The workers.
 Of course, the man with the title of governor
 Will be forgotten then
 On the scrap heap of time--
 He won't matter at all
 But remembered forever will be the name
 TOM MOONEY.

Mooney's behalf.⁴¹

Tom Mooney's imprisoned body is another of Ridge's brilliant rearticulations of the politics of pain. I have already discussed the site of Ridge's personal performance in "Three Men Die." In "Stone Face," the poem rather than the poet does the performing. The poem's inclusion on this broadside, used to benefit the Tom Mooney Molder's Defence Committee of San Francisco moves it into the multi-faceted spaces of public engagement with a mass of readers. A sizeable defense movement grew around Mooney's imprisonment. Mooney, an already popular left-wing trade unionist, was able to gain support on both national and international fronts.⁴² Anarchist and Blast⁴³ editor Alexander Berkman and cartoonist Robert

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The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University retains a copy of this poster, which is catalogued under the title "Labor Martyr Immortalized in Poem." Under Mooney's photograph, which identifies him by name is the caption: "A very sick man in San Quentin Prison, May 1928." Between this caption and the Lithographic Union logo at the bottom right is an advertisement: "Order this POSTER 28 x 34 inches for Labor Day, May Day, Working Class and Mooney parades and demonstrations, mass meetings, Union halls and Worker's headquarters. Price single copy 15c, 10- \$1.00 etc. to 1,000- \$50 payable to Tom Mooney Molder's Defense Committee.

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A diverse selection of individuals donated time, space and/or money on behalf of Mooney and Billings. Early on, Margaret Anderson, publisher of The Little Review, provided Robert Minor with a column in one issue to announce the prisoner's plight to readers of poems by Sandburg and Pound (Frost 148). Another early contributor was the wealthy benefactress Aline Barnsdall perhaps best known for her famous Hollywood home, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, which is now an historic landmark.

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Ironically, another magazine called Blast was published in England in 1914 and 1915 by Wyndham Lewis. Lewis, a novelist, poet, and father of Vorticism, was a fascist politically.

Minor, who was later to become a Communist Party functionary, were two of his earliest active supporters. Mooney had, in fact, contributed an article to Blast condemning military preparedness. Berkman donated much space of Blast's short life to exposing the gritty intricacies of the Mooney frame-up, particularly to the contradictory testimony given by paid informants. Robert Minor's hilarious cover drawing for the issue dated February 17, 1917 shows a prostitute being evicted from her lodgings by a big burly policeman. A caption below it announces, "The Vice Clean-Up," followed by accompanying dialogue. "But what other work can I get to do?" the woman asks the cop. "Well, I hear they need new witnesses against Mooney," he replies. More important, Mooney himself was his chief defender. He became responsible for "molding" his own image from his jail cell at San Quentin.⁴⁴ Throughout the long period of his wrongful imprisonment, Mooney oversaw a series of propaganda campaigns that insisted upon his innocence; these campaigns may be seen as successful, in that he did not meet the same fate as Sacco and Vanzetti. Pamphlets, film and photographs appear to have been Mooney's favored manner of approach and sources suggest that Mooney was particularly intent on showing the proper photographic representation of the physical strain and toll that incarceration had taken on his body. As Ward writes, Mooney "showed great concern for the facial angles and expression photographers should try to catch: No. 31921 (his prisoner

⁴⁴ Feminist and activist Miriam Allen de Ford described Mooney in the following way: "It may well be admitted that Mooney is not a gentle, tolerant saint...I have been rather amused to find that people outside California, who are indignant at the injustice done him, picture him as a mild-eyed martyr. Mooney is an aggressive, stubborn fighter; a sensitive, self-willed, touchy individual, not broken but embittered" (Frost 364).

number) should be made to look determined but not grim; he must show suffering without revealing weakness". In fact Mooney gave directives on the very fine nuances of how the public should "see" him. Photos were not to be too dark, lest he should appear fierce; his prisoner number had to appear clearly on every picture--photos were often retouched if it did not; full body shots demanded hand-cuffs; his hair sometimes appeared greyer and sparser, his face more gaunt (162).⁴⁵

Lola Ridge's poem "Stone Face" acts as both homage to Mooney, complete with metaphors of rock and stone to emphasize the labor and body of the incarcerated, and as call to action, affixed on a broadside collectively part of an organized solidarity campaign. The poem works as a dedication to the labor martyr by constructing, through poetic device, an image of physical and spiritual torment. Consider the poem's first stanza:

They have carved you into a stone face. Tom Mooney
 You, there lifted high in California
 Over the salt wash of the Pacific,
 With your eyes...crying in many tongues,
 Goading, innumerable eyes of the multitudes,

45

Ward and Frost mention two interesting propaganda performances that show the Mooney Defense's determination and creativity. After the committee failed to obtain a boycott of the 1932 Olympic Games in Los Angeles, six members of the Young Communist League ran onto the stadium, at the end of one day's event, in track and field outfits with "Free Tom Mooney" signs pinned to their chests and backsides; they ran around the track shouting "Free Tom Mooney." In the other stunt, a group of west coast Socialists got a hearse, equipped with coffin, and plastered a banner across it reading "Justice is Dead in California. The driver, a well spoken, Mooney devotee, drove state wide handing out pamphlets and speaking on Mooney's behalf wherever he could find an audience. The tour was so successful, that Mooney directed a second hearse to Washington, DC. In fervent gloom, it paraded past the capital building and the White House.

Holding in them all hopes, fears, persecutions,
Forever straining one way.

Ridge's Mooney is carved and chiseled like the rocks worked by San Quentin prisoners. As a stone breaker, he is linked with all imprisoned bodies. He is also exalted and symbolic--the "persecutions" of "multitudes" are reflected through his gaze. Ridge reveals Mooney's "stone face" through multiple suggestions; he turns literally "gray"--stone color--while he rots in jail; "stone face" also recalls the characteristic stare found in mug shots, and finally, faces of stone belong to those "great men" to whom statues are erected. The poem also shows a tacit awareness of Mooney as exploited and exploiter, for he is presented as both erased and faced. On the one hand he is celebrated as ordinary worker, "a rough man, \ Rude-nurtured, casually shouldering \ Through a May-day crowd." Yet he is also one who has been "raised with torsion to identity," victimized by a corrupt legal system that has also written into history "Sacco and the fish-monger."

"Stone Face" molds Mooney's body in pain; it describes his features as they have been abused and exhausted by prison life. Ridge's critics no doubt read the poem as "propaganda."⁴⁶ Yet perhaps the poem's greatest cultural intervention is its ability to work not only as "propaganda" (if it could help save Mooney's life, why not?) but also as social text and aesthetic object. Importantly it challenges the place of poetry in the "high" literary magazine and its limited audience "Stone Face," in fact, appeared in three disparate reading venues--a Tom Mooney Molder's Defense

⁴⁶ One example is Louise Bogan's less than favorable review of Dance of Fire in The New Republic.

Committee poster, The Nation, a left of center magazine of opinions, and Ridge's last book, Dance of Fire, published by Smith and Haas, a small literary publishing company later bought by Random House.

As the poem informs us, Ridge has imagined Mooney from a photo "in the Sunday papers." Ridge's Mooney with his "face tight-bitten like a pierced fist" and "eyes" that "have a transfixed gleam" brings readers into a visual engagement with her subject's injurious predicament. Ridge's desire to construct her vision of Mooney, through an already manipulated image whose creation he directed from his prison cell, complicates the process of reading poems for their aesthetic value only, distanced from the problematic social communities in which they are produced. As Ridge constructs the poem to sustain the image of the suffering, deteriorating Mooney, as well as lending it to the Molder's Defence Committee to advertise the cause, she raises some questions about traditional assumptions about where poetry belongs. What are we to make of Ridge's composition as we understand that Mooney's carceral body has been manipulated, retouched, its appearance completely negotiated? Rather than answer this question, it would make more sense to suggest that our need to ask it reflects the way we have been taught to look at modern poetry—through a disinterested lens that suggests poems belong to an historically unlocated solitary readership, disassociated from movements or other popular and communal discourses which can only turn the poem in question into "propaganda." Lola Ridge, and the Tom Mooney Molder's Defense Committee, by rendering Mooney symbolic, in fact poeticize as well as politicize the Mooney Case. After all, poetic language is a manipulation of

the word, and the poem as it becomes part of the "free Mooney" broadside also becomes linked to the defense committee's manipulation of the Mooney image.

For Ridge, this literary portrait of Mooney rotting in jail extends beyond the local desire to free one particular individual or to shed light on one singular aspect of legal corruption. The prison system itself, a place metaphorically linked to bodily pain and domination, becomes symbolic; as Foucault writes: "its very materiality...[is] an instrument and vector of power" (Discipline and Punish 30). Lola Ridge is once again prescient in her understanding of the political location of the imprisoned body. In the final stanza of "Stone Face" the prison itself becomes a body. She imagines Mooney, symbol of labor's perseverance, set free (hence the poem and broadside announce their own efficacy in freeing Mooney), his face "clenched" like a fist "under the long \ Gaze of the generations," who will be, as Ridge hopes, witnesses to San Quentin's own demise, its walls "caved in and its steel ribs \ Food for the ant-rust." Ridge ends the poem, though, with the same wish as Langston Hughes (see note 40), by rendering "Governor Rolph," who refused to pardon Mooney, "A fleck of dust among the archives." Both poets wanted the radical to live, his name and his face to become part of American history. So far we can't say they succeeded.

Though Ridge's interest in the Mooney Case, her activism at the trial and execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, her outrage at the lynchings of Frank Little and Leo Frank center on the male body in pain, (with the important exception of the charred and maimed bodies of African-American women and children), Ridge, as an ardent feminist, was no less concerned with the female carceral body. Yet the male body has

always been in the public eye; its participation in social struggle and war, characteristically a subject of debate and (de)liberation, has played a major role in how it became a subject of interest to radical writers such as Lola Ridge.⁴⁷ Perhaps Ridge's finest contribution as a poet, however, is a long narrative poem that draws upon the female body as it experiences both pain and pleasure, as my discussion of her first major poetic success, "The Ghetto," will show.

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To understand Ridge, a radical poet, as well as feminist, and the importance of working class politics in her writing, we need to consider a view point that may have been close to her. It also might help explain why representations of female activism (other than her own) are not found in most of the poems I have so far discussed. In Women, Resistance, and Revolution, Sheila Rowbotham presents an important difference in feminist thought between the American born suffragists and immigrant radical feminists like Emma Goldman (with whom Ridge was allied during her years working for the Ferrer Association). "Goldman showed how the Stanton-Anthony tendency within feminism remained deliberately blinkered about labor movement struggles even to the point of supporting strike-breaking by women. This earned them the antagonism not only of male but female-workers" (109). If Ridge was siding with male (and female) workers, it would be difficult at this point to find her embracing a suffragist agenda that condoned strike breaking, whether by women or men.

II. Murillo's Mulatto: A Feminist in the Ghetto.

Having articulated Ridge's interest in politicizing the body in pain as a poetic trope in the previous section, I want to touch upon a reference to the carceral body to introduce her feminist concerns. In a 1919 lecture Ridge gave on feminism and art in which she discusses "why there are no great women artists," she asks her audience to imagine a particular historical scenario by drawing upon the legend surrounding the 17th century Spanish painter Bartolomeo Murillo. Murillo was reported to have discovered his slave putting finishing touches on the head of one of his paintings of the virgin, and was so impressed with his work that he encouraged his painting. As Lola Ridge observes, adding a gendered twist: "If Murillo's mulatto had been a girl instead of a boy slave, his master would not have given him his liberty and helped him to develop into an artist. A girl slave who had the temerity to dream of painting a white Virgin would probably have been raped and left to forget her dreams in straining lips at her breast" (15).⁴⁸ The violence of this suggestion, fitting with the characterizations of the carceral body typified in poems I discussed earlier, shows

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An important connection must be made between Ridge's comment about "Murillo's mulatto" and Virginia Woolf's creation of "Shakespeare's sister." A Room of One's Own, perhaps this century's most significant discussion of feminism and art was published in 1929, ten years after Ridge gave her lecture on the subject. Woolf imagines Judith Shakespeare, who "had the quickest fancy, a gift like her brother's, for the tune of words" (49). She runs away to London to seek training in the theatre, but she could get no such training, let alone "seek her dinner in a tavern or roam the streets at midnight." Instead she becomes an object of pity of actor-manager Nick Greene. "She found herself with child by that gentleman and so—who shall measure the heat and violence of the poet's heart when caught and tangled in a woman's body?—killed herself one winter's night and lies buried at some cross-roads where the omnibuses now stop outside the Elephant and Castle" (50).

Ridge aggressively engaging her audience (a majority, probably Midwestern "club" ladies) to women's victimization through their bodies, not because they were 'biologically inferior,' but because that same physical body had been denied access to the very centers of political, social and cultural life routinely awarded to men. Ridge's lecture, with its Nietzschean title "Woman and the Creative Will,"⁴⁹ explores women's artistic expression from Sappho up through Sweden's 1909 Nobel Laureate, Selma Lagerlof. She insists upon the bisexual nature of "genius," and informs us that there are no "great women artists" because women have not been allowed to express themselves to their fullest capacity, and through the widest depths of experience, as have men. Importantly, the lecture, which was, incidently, sponsored by the modernist journal Others that Ridge had helped edit, represents female subjectivity through a materialist position that anticipates subsequent discussions on the social construction of gender encountered in diverse feminists theorists such as Juliet Mitchell, Julia Kristeva, Michele Barrett and Nancy Chodorow. "Woman is not and never has been man's **natural** inferior," Ridge maintains. (bold mine). "She has been and still is suffering from arrested development; and considering the mental and spiritual strait jacket within which she has had to grow, she has not made such a bad showing" (18). "Woman and the Creative Will" shows Ridge continuing her polemic on the body in pain by articulating the constraints put on creative women. The

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For a discussion of the background pertaining to this lecture, and the book Ridge had planned to write from it, see Elaine Sproat's introduction to "Woman and the Creative Will," in Michigan Occasional Papers in Women's Studies (18\19). Ann Arbor: Women's Studies Program, University of Michigan, 1981.

imaginative trope of Murillo's mulatto as a defeated and assaulted female artist conjoins the description of the socially constructed strait jacket to communicate Ridge's prescient awareness of the aesthetic waste lands of classed, sexed, and racialized bodies, as well as a suggestion about their possibilities. If the suggestion of the carceral female form permeates Ridge's discussion of women and art, it is a significant trope in one of her most important poetic contributions. The long poem, "The Ghetto" (1918) relies heavily upon the female body to explore its varying themes of immigration, ghettoization, cultural difference and assimilation. "The Ghetto," portions of which first appeared in The New Republic,⁵⁰ is an imagistic narrative exploration of Jewish immigrant life examined largely through the activities of women.

"The Ghetto" introduces the immigrant experience into poetic discourse—more precisely, the Jewish ghetto. With this poem Ridge made one of the first attempts to articulate urban immigrant experience in the form of a narrative poem—certainly the first of its kind to be published in America. In the verse cadences of modernism, with

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The cover of the April 13th, 1918 issue of The New Republic, the then four year old liberal opinion magazine, announced Lola Ridge's arrival onto the literary scene, as it were. Beginning with an announcement of its lead article "Politics During War," the titles finish off in triangular fashion, "What Democracy Means," by H.G. Wells and "The Ghetto," by Lola Ridge. While the magazine debated issues related to the United States' entrance into World War One, which The New Republic ultimately endorsed despite the room it gave to anti-war intellectuals like Ridge and critics Randolph Bourne and Van Wyck Brooks, Ridge's poem explored a social phenomenon that war-time fervor strived to bury. **nb** The full text of the poem appeared in Ridge's first collection, The Ghetto and Other Poems, published in the fall of the same year.

its heightened sense of image and free form lines, are gritty descriptions of destitute, Yiddish speaking Jews. Ridge's ghetto is a place of communal desire with all its complexities: its squalor, over-crowding, ceaseless physical and mental activity, its discussion and dissent. Moreover, Ridge presented a new America through these culturally isolated immigrants whose religious and linguistic rituals displayed their "otherness" against the more "familiar" American middle and working-class, traditions. Ridge embraces the "different" cultural body, the political body and woman's "laboring and desiring" bodies that would become a focus of much "proletarian" literature produced by women later in the 1930s.⁵¹ Yet Ridge has few peers in the first decade of the new century who can embrace both current experimental trends in modern poetry and a concern for the burgeoning social communities that would come to redefine the American landscape and languagescape. It must also be acknowledged that Ridge is prescient in her sense of the ghetto as a transient space, even as ghetto culture continues to be a thriving aspect of American life.⁵² Readers who are, at present "ghettoized" may be able to recognize themselves

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The phrase "labor and desire" comes from Paula Rabinowitz's brilliant study on women's revolutionary fiction of the 1930s. She looks closely at how gender difference and women's writing resituates the arena in which radical politics played itself out in depression-era America.

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Ghettoization has always created new cultural practices. For example, rhythm and blues music as precursor to rock and roll (referred to in the 90s as "classic rock") was an hybridization of earlier musical forms developed during slavery times. Northern migration and ghettoization of African-Americans redefined these earlier forms to the realities of the new locales. Moreover, Lola Ridge's ghetto is a new creative site—a tapestry, a mosaic, a fabric in the making. Yet, the mercantile aspects of Jewish life,

and their lives in much of what is represented in this poem.

The importance of gender, of women's participation in Jewish communal life in America, is one of the poem's central tropes. In fact, Ridge's ghetto is metaphorically represented as a "cramped ova," and is replete with images of the mother "waddling in and out." The poem utilizes a divisional frame of nine sections that mirror the stages of maternal gestation. When in the poem's eighth section, (and towards the final gestational stage), Ridge expresses that "Life in the cramped ova" [is] Tearing and rending asunder its living cells," she equates the painful (and joyous) process of birth, as well as the discomforts of pregnancy, with the creation and dissent of a community in various stages of transition. The ghetto may be dark and cramped, but it is also a positive site of cultural formation. This birthing metaphor, as it articulates the labor pains associated with child-bearing, also suggests the "pains of labor" in terms of the physically exhaustive labor performed by Jewish immigrants inside the sweatshops—a site of exploitation and activity to which she returns throughout the poem. Importantly, Ridge's reading of her subject through female activity and the female body complicates any aspect of modernist poetics articulated, as in the case of Pound or Wyndham Lewis, through the phallus. She also creates a site for a reading of modernism that embraces the entrance of female and immigrant working class readers (and writers). Though the lines "Life in the cramped ova \

through which Jews have generally been type-cast, are subordinated to the creative possibilities of its feminist and socialist concerns—a people whose holy book tells of liberation. It is here that Ridge hopes to work out her themes of Jewish immigrant life.

tearing and rending asunder its living cells" may be obvious to contemporary readers who will make the connection between the "ghetto" as any "walled-in" community and "vaginal" walls—what of Ridge's readers in 1918? By fusing metaphors of the female body with representations of immigrant social life, she challenges the modernist masculinist gaze, centered upon the male body (particularly the phallus) and its dominant presence outside these metaphorical walls. Ridge not only intervenes into phallogocentric space, but also into the phallogocentric metaphor inscribed within the dominant text of male modernism.

Perhaps Ridge's greatest challenge to the male modern canon is her re-inscription of race, gender and class through her interest in representing Jewish working class life through the metaphorical tropes of the female body. It is also interesting that Ridge's own body becomes part of the poem's construction, as I indicate later. Though not Jewish, Ridge is herself a poor immigrant who has been a factory worker like the characters in her narrative poem. She also shares the radical political sensibilities of the ghetto's younger inhabitants and is thus familiar with the debates and discussions in the cafes and meeting halls. Still, one might ask why Ridge singles out Jews, given the variety of immigrant communities establishing themselves in American cities. One response locates the poet in the following lines, inside the Jewish ghetto, identifying herself and her own experience there:

I room at Sodos'—in the little green room
 that was Bennie's—
 With Sadie
 And her old father and her mother,
 Who is not so old and wears her own hair.

By identifying herself as a "boarder," she introduces an important aspect of immigrant Jewish economic life that was largely controlled by women. A 1911 Immigration Commission study observed that 56 percent of all Russian Jewish households in New York added to their monthly earnings by taking in boarders.⁵³ These tenants, many single immigrant girls whose bodies are also defining tropes within Ridge's ghetto, can be placed within both an "old" and "new" world practice in which Jewish women, though limited by their role as keepers of the domestic sphere, still managed to exercise economic acumen. Even if Ridge is merely constructing a "persona," she chooses to read herself within the spaces of Jewish life to suggest an affinity with a group of people whose historical journey she desires to locate somewhere within her own psyche. Ridge recognizes Jewish history as one of exile. She was born in Dublin and grew up in Australia and New Zealand, coming to America at the age of 35 with a failed marriage behind her. As an immigrant as well as a radical intellectual and poet living on the margins, she no doubt identified with Jews and found consolation and a sense of solidarity in acknowledging their historical circumstances. If, as Jane Marcus has maintained in Virginia Woolf's case, that the white modernist woman's embrace of the other often enabled her own identity, then Ridge's representation of Jewish ghetto life acts as a kind of Primitivist catalyst. Ira Nadel also has pointed to James Joyce's use of Judaic references as well as his

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This statistic comes from Susan A. Glenn's engrossing social history of Immigrant Jewish women in the United States, Daughters of the Shtetl. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994. (?)

important use of a Jewish persona, Leopold Bloom, to suggest Joyce's affinity with this historically exiled community.⁵⁴ Yet even as we read the "I" in this poem as the poet, Ridge's difference from the community must be acknowledged. She is not a Jew nor does she speak Yiddish, the language of the ghetto.⁵⁵ To the Lower East Side Jew she could not be more strange, even to the young socialist and anarchist women whom she so much admires. Moreover, I must add that this choice of "the Jew," and the construction of "Jewishness" present special problems for a modernist poet, especially in terms of her canonical reception. Eliot Weinberger perceptively outlines this point. He argues that the "mixing," the collage, the fragmentation, that are essential components of modernist aesthetics are in direct conflict with a number of aspects within Judaic tradition. "In the Judaism of Mosaic laws the human yearning for wholeness manifests itself...in a loathing for that which is incomplete, mixed, other" (170). He does maintain that Judaism's decrees against "mixing" is not the direct basis for the anti-semitism of American modernists such as Pound and Williams, but Ridge's "modernist" embrace of Jewish life would no doubt be also

⁵⁴ See Marcus, Jane "A Very Fine Negress: Race in A Room of One's Own, forthcoming. See also Nadel, Ira, Joyce and the Jews: Culture and Texts, (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1989).

⁵⁵

The Jewish ghetto in fact had a number of its own poets who wrote in the Yiddish language and published in Yiddish papers like the Forverts (The Jewish Daily Forward). Morris Rosenfeld (1862-1923) is especially noteworthy for this particular discussion since he was nicknamed the "pants presser poet." His Songs from the Ghetto was published in a bilingual edition in 1898, (Copeland & Day, Boston). His poetry, though maudlin and stylistically representative of an earlier era, expressed the harsh realities of sweat-shop life.

rejected by these poets. Her poem is an outright "collage" in its expression of Jewish cultural mixing, which she complicates as a painful, blasphemous, inevitable, and even desirable outcome of the diasporic condition, and of modernity. Despite Ridge's own differences, her attempt to narrativize immigrant Jewish structures of feeling informs her position, as her friend Alfred Kreymborg suggested, "as another Babushka released from exile to a place of leadership among her contemporaries" (337).

Ridge opens the poem by constructing an outside glance looking in, rather like the opening of a film in which the director establishes location through panning shots of buildings, roads, more buildings, focusing on particular colors and textures until she comes to the people--whose lives are about to be viewed. Yet these people are at first offered to us not as specific individuals with descriptive features, but rather as bodies, massive flesh, "ponderous bulk." They "dangle from the fire escapes \ Or sprawl over the stoops." Eventually they become faces that "glimmer pallidly" and are "herring-yellow" or "dank white." Ridge's references to color, which she arranges in a palette-like languagescape, work as markers for the sections of the poem where both poet and reader take their most penetrating exterior glances. In fact Ridge studied painting in Sydney, Australia before coming to the United States. The reference to painting is also important because it links Ridge to an art movement whose aesthetic principles are stylistically akin to much of her early work. Robert Henri and John Sloan were, at one time, instructors at the Ferrer Association's "Modern School," where Ridge had been an organizer. They are better known as part of "The Eight" or the "Ash Can School" of painting. Inspired by both Impressionism

and Post-Impressionism, they set out to redirect the focus of the academic formal subject towards depicting ordinary street life and everyday experience. The "herring yellow" and "dank white" faces are also important distinctions, for they create a contrast to "whiteness."⁵⁶ At one point in "The Ghetto," Ridge does refer to Jews as "the litter of East," but it is not so much their exoticism that attracts her in this poem; it is their engagement as a community and the desire as well as dissent produced within these communal walls.⁵⁷ This is a community that has split apart and come together in the diaspora -- the "scattered remnant"-- to borrow the term Susan Stanford Friedman uses to describe H.D.'s raced and gendered politics of modernism.

The salient image of the opening section is oppressive heat of the Ghetto.

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It is difficult to know how or whether Ridge thought of Jews in distinct racial terms. She, herself a dark haired and dark eyed Irish woman would certainly have understood racial stereotypes within her own ethnic group. Indeed, racial classification for Jews has generally been more complicated than for other groups of European immigrants. For example, many Jews from the East European "Pale of the Settlement" emigrated to the United States to escape "racial" laws in Czarist Russia. These particular laws expelled Jews from the large cities, barred them from universities and most businesses. Immigration applications displayed in the Ellis Island Museum show "Hebrew" as a racial category for Jewish immigrants; whereas Italian, Slovak, or Greek immigrants are identified racially through their country of origin. If Italians, Slovaks, or Greeks could at least be identified through a country of origin, Jews became (e)raced because of their countrylessness. The "darkness" of these Europeans, and their statelessness, made them all the more "exotic." Thus Jews came into the new world as a racial category all their own, even though they were "white."

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As David Roediger and Noel Ignatiev have discussed, European working-class immigrants like the Irish became "white" when they understood and accepted their "whiteness" as a position of prestige and advantage over non-white laborers. Thus a history of white working class racism was constructed, much to the chagrin of labor historians whose *modus operandi* was to write the working class into history--unproblematically.

"Inaccessible air \ Is floating in velvety blackness shot with steel-blue \ lights," she informs us. She further characterizes the heat on Hester Street as "nosing in the body's overflow...[c]overing all avenues of air," and "[h]eaped like a dray \ With the garbage of the world." The discomfort and decay she presents through heat and exposed flesh as the prevalent linguistic signs show Ridge's ability to identify with the social oppression of her subjects as well as invent a language to describe them. More to Ridge's credit is her apparent solidarity with her subject. She is able to locate the Jewish ghetto's struggle in its particular historical context:

The street crawls undulant,
Like a river addled
With its hot tide of flesh
That ever thickens...

Flesh of this abiding
Brood of those ancient mothers who saw the dawn
break over Egypt...
And turned their cakes upon the dry hot stones
And went on...

Not only does Ridge emphasize the importance of reading ghetto Jewry through its biblical experience in slavery, but she specifies that the gradual arrival of the people among whom she lives must be recognized through the singular accomplishments of its "enslaved" women. Though Ridge clearly admires these people as a community, a communal body suffering in both literal and metaphorical flesh enveloping heat, she sees the women and their labor (and here the pun must be acknowledged) as central to her poetic articulation. Part of Ridge's identification with the working class and working class politics is her belief in and respect for its tenacity. Jewish ghetto life is thus the "enduring flesh" she sees "[a]cross the centuries" that puts its peculiar

racialized stamp on social movement and struggle.

Though Bakhtin's critical domain is the novel, his concept of heteroglossia (and to some degree the "carnavalesque") may be usefully applied to a poem like "The Ghetto." This heteroglossia, or multi-voiced discourse, as it is also termed--the many speaking voices and social landscapes of a literary text--is certainly present in "the Ghetto." This poem mixes narrative voice with snap-shot imagery and displays linguistic surfaces that denote the multi-textures of New York's Hester Street and its surroundings. "The Ghetto," like the majority of modernist poems, does not contain 'dialogue between characters' as is found in the novel form--though there is some. "The social and historical voices populating language" (300) are, as Bakhtin notes, reflected through the "majestic discordances," "multi-colored dreams," "world- voices \ Chanting grand arias" and "words \ Pattering like hail" that are part of the disagreements and individual and communal passions that populate this poem. This sampling of phrases suggests Ridge's interest in conveying the multi-voiced, cacaphonic atmosphere of immigrant Jewish space. The poem's fourth section, in particular, is marked with an assortment of words and phrases representing the heteroglossic atmosphere of a bazaar. Grand Street is "Crowded like a float, \ Bulging like a crazy quilt \ Stretched on a line." Ridge further admires "This litter of the East" through its "dissolute array" of goods displayed for sale throughout the market stalls. In fact she appears to find the dissonance and dissidence of the individual ghetto voices equaled in "the glitter and the jumbled finery...strangely juxtaposed." Bakhtin maintains that poetic genres "in the narrow sense" are primarily

`monologic'—void of the extrinsic linguistic possibilities that foster heteroglossia—a poem like "The Ghetto" is, nonetheless, exceedingly heteroglossic. "The Ghetto" does not, as Bakhtin contends about the majority of poetic genres, speak through the singular voice of the poet, but through the multifarious signifying contexts so descriptively captured in the poem. The Bakhtinian preference for polyphonic discourse is ever present in Ridge's ghetto. In fact it works to complicate poetic form by the manner in which the text's "majestic discordances"—its characters, its embrace of dissent and social contradiction—embody novelistic tropes. With "The Ghetto" Ridge creates a deliberately polyphonic poetics of immigrant life. She does so by using dialect, speech, and gritty imagery, which envelop her poem with visceral descriptions of impoverished, irreverent subjects who, in fact, take over the poem and beg the reader to join them inside their rituals and their revolutions.

Feminists have found Bakhtin useful because these "social and historical" voices and the polyphonic rather than monologic (read male) voice of a text suggests female participation in the text's dialogic landscape. Ridge emphasizes female voices in "The Ghetto" as a major part of her construction of ghetto dialogism. The image of heat and the capacious body that fill the ghetto are interesting metaphors for the sweat shop, an important site of exploitation as well as political action. Though Ridge populates the poem with a variety of female `types,' the emergence of the sweat shop as the `voice' of female labor is particularly important. Ridge also constructs this `voice' to offer a glimpse of the complexities surrounding immigrant Jewish women as they participate in the social and political entanglements of ghetto life. Sadie, who

like her mother "wears her own hair,"⁵⁸ is, as were so many women beyond the pages of Ridge's text, a sweat shop worker. However, she is also a studious, intellectual free-thinker.

Ridge complicates the relations between men and women, the old and young, or the "greenhorns" and those who have been "Americanized." For example, she juxtaposes Sadie's and her mother's secularized acts with the father's loss of trade through immigration: "Old Sodos no longer makes saddles \ He has forgotten how." Ridge establishes further tension through warm descriptions of Old Sodos' continued faith: "I see the love-gesture of his arm \ In its green-greasy coat-sleeve \ Circling the Book." Old Sodos' work stained clothes are part of his new world identity, and mingle with his old world practice of prayer, something which tradition dictates be done three times a day. However, his daughter, Sadie, whose female status by tradition requires fewer obligations to prayer and more dedication to the domestic sphere, finds herself practicing neither. Necessity forces her to work outside the home, yet the work place with its stifling heat, deafening din and flesh eating air, is also responsible for her developing awareness of female exploitation and her resultant resistance.

All day the power machines
Drone in her ears...

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This reference to wearing one's "own hair" is necessary in pointing out Ridge's keen observations. One's own hair symbolizes assimilation—the adoption of the ways of the American woman, which also suggests a loss of one's cultural identity as an "old world" Jewish woman. Immigrant Jewish women of the period, if they were religiously observant, wore *shedls* — wigs that signify the married woman's modesty.

All day the fine dust flies
 Till throats are parched and itch
 And the heat--like a kept corpse--
 Fouls to the last corner.

Sadie's body, though exploited at work, also resists a tradition that claims the female body as a possession of the father until given away to the husband in an arranged marriage. The body is choked, reified in two extremes. "Sadie quivers like a rod... \ A thin black piston flying, \ One with her machine." Interestingly, Ridge follows the potent descriptions of reification by an empowered Sadie who warns her fellow workers in one of the poem's few examples of dialogue: "Slow down--You'll have him cutting us again!" In fact, Ridge's feel for the stress and involvement of Jewish female garment workers can be related to the experience of an actual glove maker and union activist, Agnes Nestor: "When I started in the trade and saw the girls working at that dreadful pace every minute, I wondered how they could keep up the speed. But it is not until you become one of them that you can understand" (138).⁵⁹ Sadie's fatigue and determination are also reminiscent of another garment worker and activist. In a 1912 editorial in Life and Labor, Anna Rudnitzky, laments the absence of romance, music, theatre and opera, as well as the opportunities offered by a high

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Agnes Nestor wrote about her experiences as a glove maker and union organizer in Life and Labor, the publication of the Chicago based National Women's Trade Union League, which was edited by Alice Henry. The League was instrumental in supporting and aiding the 1910 shirt-waist makers strike in which over twenty-thousand, mostly teen-aged girls, walked off their jobs in protest of poor wages, long hours, and unsafe working conditions. Most of this work, about which the young women protested, was performed in and around 'the Ghetto.' One year later 146 people, mostly women and girls, died in a fire at the Triangle Shirt-Waist Company. The Triangle Company had been a 1910 strike target.

school and university education, because her working life allows for no leisure:

In the busy time I work so hard; try to make the machine run faster,
and faster because then I can earn some money and I need it, and then
night comes and I am tired out and I go home and I am too weary for
anything but supper and bed. Sometimes union meetings, yes, because
I must go. But I have no mind and nothing left in me. The busy time
means to earn enough money not only to cover the slack time, and then
when the slack time comes I am not so tired, I have more time, but I
have no money; and time is passing and everything is missed.

Hutchins Hapgood, whom Ridge would have known through her work with the Ferrer Association, writes with praise about "Jewish New Womanhood" in his journalistic study of Jewish life on the Lower East Side, Spirit of the Ghetto, published in 1902. He admires the self-possessed, "masculine" characters of these Jewish new women. Yet Ridge's intimate portraits of Sadie, her quick sketches of Anna and Sarah, as well as nameless female bodies whose desires are evoked throughout the poem, offer a more personal embrace; there is a sense of solidarity that she maintains with them. For example, Ridge creates in Sadie a complicated immigrant new woman who must make her way between traditions in which she no longer believes and a history that she acknowledges has prepared her for the struggles of the "new world."⁶⁰ Sadie embodies desire, self-knowledge, perseverance. Ridge's

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As Susan A. Glenn maintains in Daughters of the Shtetl, many immigrant Jewish women had been influenced by the Bundist movement in the Russian pale. Socialist in nature, the Jewish Bundists embraced the radical philosophies circulating in late nineteenth century Russia. As Glenn writes: "Women derived from the socialist movement a sense of personal dignity and importance available nowhere else in Jewish society. With their commitment to the principle of social equality, Jewish socialists moved tentatively toward the idea of gender equality...Women and men would together make the revolution as comrades in struggle" (38).

powerful lines weave this character from laborer, "She--fiery static atom," to student of the latest philosophical trends: "Nights, she reads \ Those books that have most unset thought, \ New-poured and malleable..." As Sadie embraces feminism and anarchism, like her creator, she further articulates ghetto activism, its internal and external influences, its embrace of the "old world" and absorption into the new. Sadie, in fact, personifies the very contradictions of ghetto life as they are scripted. Her "fire"⁶¹ whether in her exhausting sweatshop work, her intellectual pursuits, her sexual life, or her activism, like the candles lit by female members of the family on the Sabbath eve, is never extinguished. Sadie's "voice," suggested by her "lit eyes kindling the mob...[that] dances madly at a festival," is reminiscent of Emma Goldman's famous statement that, twenty years ago, appeared on many tee-shirts: "if I can't dance, I don't want to be in your revolution."

Sadie's voice is also reminiscent of the young immigrant Jewish women who created themselves intellectually and politically as strike leaders in the then nascent garment industry. Annelise Orleck's recent study of working-class women's politics in the United States, Common Sense and a Little Fire, outlines the contributions of four immigrant Jewish women who began their political activism on New York's Lower East Side: Fannia Cohn, Clara Lemlich, Pauline Newman, and Rose

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It is worth noting that Ridge's description of Sadie as "she--fiery static atom" introduced an image that became one of Ridge's most central motifs. "We are living in a dynasty of fire," she wrote in a preface to her last book, Dance of Fire (1935). The fire symbol, often associated with anarchist principles, stayed with Ridge long after her break with the anarchist movement.

Schneiderman. These women, like Sadie, were born "into a world swept by a firestorm of new ideas, where the contrasting but equally messianic visions of orthodox Judaism and revolutionary Socialism competed for young minds" (17). Orleck defines the aspirations of these four women whose lives mirror the ascent of working-class women's political activism: "These marginally educated immigrant women wanted to be more than shop-floor drudges. They wanted lives filled with beauty—with friendships, books, art, music, dance, fresh air and clean water" (16). To further emphasize the importance of getting both "bread and roses," the trope most often associated with immigrant working-class women, Orleck quotes Pauline Newman, later to become an important figure in both the International Ladies Garment Workers Union and the Socialist Party: "a working girl is a human being...with a heart, with desires, with aspirations, with ideas and ideals." Immigrant Jewish female desire appeared to represent at that moment in U.S. history for radical outsiders like Lola Ridge, the energy, as well as the social and aesthetic possibilities of a young land. And in this young land there was room for transgression. Perhaps Sadie's boldest act is taking a "Gentile lover." Through this act Ridge constructs the woman's function in maintaining family and cultural stability. Sadie, secularized and sexualized, complicates paternal orthodoxy by mixing with "goyim" (and thus represents modernist "mixing" as well). Though her brother Bennie has himself a "Christian woman...", Sadie's mother realizes that her daughter's "breech" will do much less harm to traditional family integrity:

A man is not so like,
If they should fight,

To call her Jew...⁶²

Ridge is perhaps more interested in representing the difficulties women face within patriarchal society than in establishing the rigidity of patriarchal culture. In addition to Sadie, Ridge introduces Sarah and Anna, who "live on the floor above." Sarah "reads without bias" and Anna "has the appeal of a folk-song." Their differences from each other are celebrated, as they are depicted as complementary beings: "Sarah is swarthy and ill-dressed" and Anna, whose clothes may be "cheap," seems dressed "always in rhythm." In fact, Anna and Sarah's textual positions are synecdochal: they are female figures who stand in place of the unobserved complementary and contradictory ghetto figures as they participate in ghetto life.

Ridge's immigrant "new women," at the core of her sympathetic free form long poem, suggest another neglected writer's emancipatory narrative.⁶³ Anzia Yeziarska's autobiographical prose of life in the Jewish ghetto, her "Salome of the Tenements," as she titled one of her books, indeed complements Ridge's intimate yet

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Reading these lines when I first rediscovered this poem reminded me that as a girl, when I would listen to my mother talk to her girlfriends on the telephone, I would hear exactly this same "voice" as they gossiped about a mutual friend's daughter who was going to marry a "gentile boy." *nb.* In the Jewish religion the cultural line is carried through the mother. If the mother is Jewish, so will be her child.

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I use the term "emancipatory narrative" in the sense that it is used by critics to discuss slave narratives like those of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, rather than using a term such as "bildungsroman." Yeziarska's stories of immigrant Jewish life, though they are about the "getting of wisdom" of young immigrants and the "Americanization" of "greenhorns," more significantly indulge in the hardships, the losses, and the extreme emotional and physical stress that are distinct features of slave and/or emancipation narratives.

outside gaze.⁶⁴ Additionally, Yeziarska's work indicates how keenly perceptive Ridge was in illuminating the desires and dilemmas of ghetto girls and women.

Yeziarska's story "How I Found America" tells of a young girl's emigration. She discovers, on New York's Lower East Side that the "Age-old visions" that "sang themselves in me--songs of freedom of an oppressed people" (262) are to be encountered through the lens of a drab, noisy, airless, cluttered ghetto. Here her fate is sealed along with numerous other Jewish immigrants where the sweatshop becomes her schoolroom. Both Ridge and Yeziarska describe the sweatshop through its panoptic effect.⁶⁵ We are thus reminded that "the gaze is alert everywhere" (Foucault 195). As she works to make "twenty-five cents on the dozen" (269), Yeziarska's protagonist tries to decipher improvements in her "condition" since emigrating: "The hard, red face with pig's eyes held us under its sickening spell. Again I saw the Cossack and heard him thunder the ukaz" (268). However, when the women fear that one of them will be cut, Yeziarska's nameless protagonist dares to speak to the boss.

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Originally published in 1923, Salome of the Tenements describes the real life romance of Jewish immigrant and radical Rose Pastor and the millionaire socialist Graham Stokes. Yeziarska had had herself been romantically involved with the famous educator and philosopher John Dewey. The book explores and critiques the "dedication" and hypocrisy of the rich towards the poor on New York's Lower East Side. The University of Illinois Press's "Radical Novel Reconsidered" series reprinted the novel in 1995 with a new introduction by Gay Wilentz.

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Michel Foucault, in Discipline and Punish, refers to the Panopticon and Panopticism as it was used in prison design as a means of best surveilling inmates: "the major effect of the Panopticon [is] to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (201).

With the same atomic fury as Ridge's Sadie, she enters..."the boss's office without a shadow of fear...the wrongs of my people burned through me till I felt the very flesh of my body a living flame of rebellion" (270). Like Sadie her resistance develops through her awareness of the "sickening spell" of not only the boss's gaze, but of the reifying conditions of sweatshop labor; the flesh, the body--a communal body at that, envelops her representation of ghetto life. Also like Sadie, her protagonist's conflicts place her in a position where intellectual desire sets her apart from the communal body. "Lunch-hour at the factory. My book of Shelley's poems before me and I was soon millions of miles beyond the raucous voices of the hungry eaters" (287). After a disappointing visit to an "Immigrant School" where she discovers that the intellectual contributions of the immigrant Jews were not wanted, she goes to see her sister's teacher, who, with a few kind words, agrees to help her find herself. Yeziarska ends her story on a note of affirmation, evoking a future where both intellectual and communal spirit survive.

Ridge's and Yeziarska's gendered readings of ghetto experience are absolutely central to their creative agendas. Both writers reimagine the ghetto as "feminized space"--a space, indeed, in the process of transforming itself and the America outside its walls. One thinks of the recent statistics that have appeared regularly in the American news media pointing to the ever-increasing "feminization of poverty," almost as if it were a new phenomenon. Ridge's articulation of ghetto life suggests that these urban spaces inhabited by the poor have, since their very inception, told their stories through the voices and bodies of women.

If, as I have maintained, Ridge's ghetto walls are oppressive in their enclosure of a "cramped...shut flesh," they also act as nurturer, for the ghetto is the site of Jewish life and culture. Indeed it prompts "wars, arts, discoveries, rebellions, travails, immolations, \ cataclysms, hates..." As evening descends upon the ghetto it does so with a protective curtain shrouded in maternal imagery: "The old mammy night" with "wide-opening crooked and comforting arms," and "a voluminous skirt." This night is also distinctly used as a bridge between the brutality of work, particularly in the sweatshop, and the erotic encounters between young working women and men 'after hours.'

In the poem's penultimate section, Ridge juxtaposes the closing of the work day with sexual awakening:

Lights go out
And the stark trunks of the factories
Melt into the drawn darkness,
Sheathing like a seamless garment.

The factories as they shut, "melt" away; the above lines also hint at the removal of clothing--the oppressive material of the work day. The "seamless garment" suggests the naked body, and the darkness that cloaks it will ultimately be its liberator.

Ensuing descriptions of the moon "blond and burning, creeping to their cots" further intimate the laboring body released into the erotics of nightfall:

Nude glory of the moon!
That leaps like an athlete on the bosoms of the young girls
stripped of their linens;
Stroking their breasts that are smooth and cool
as mother-of-pearl
Till the nipples tingle and burn as though little lips
plucked at them.

They shudder and grow faint.
 And their ears are filled as with a delirious rhapsody,
 That Life, like a drunken player,
 Strikes out of their clear white bodies
 As out of ivory keys.

This passage is striking considering its location in a poem in which, as I previously discussed, cultural alienation and labor exploitation are so adroitly represented.

Importantly, the moon invades this passage to suggest, as does the metaphor of the "cramped ova," that the ghetto is also a sexual and erotic space. "Life," and Ridge capitalizes the "L," "strikes out of their clear white bodies." As the young workers have been reified via their sweatshop bodies by day, at night they are released into their erotic bodies. The moon, a traditionally "female" symbol, upon which Ridge endows sexual agency, watches over the night-time ghetto "like a skull." Yet questions surface with regard to my focus on Ridge's juxtaposition of labor and desire. Where do I place my emphasis and where does Ridge place hers? I assert that Cixous and Irigaray's concepts of "writing the body" and "jouissance" are applicable to Ridge's juxtaposition of the ghettoized body. However, Deborah Rosenfelt, in a recent essay on Tillie Olsen, maintains that for Olsen, a committed leftist-feminist, "the female body...speaks not a discourse of erotic desire, but another set of **yearnings**: for justice, for wholeness, for "circumference."" Thus she "rewrites desire as social, political, communal, esthetic rather than **simply** as erotic" (58).⁶⁶ Perhaps one of the poem's great strengths is its ability to represent both erotic and political desire.

⁶⁶ bold mine

While I must maintain that Ridge represents the Jewish ghetto from a feminist perspective — describing it as a "feminized space" — my discussion of the poem would be incomplete without pointing to her construction of men's experience of ghetto life. For example, Ridge's interest in the "material" aspects of ghetto life highlights the social as well as economic contributions of its male inhabitants. Of course her exploration of the "material" has a double meaning here: There is literal material sold by peddlars, rewoven by ragpickers, and there is the material of life—cultural material. The figures that populate this text make and remake themselves; they find themselves "Flung \ Like an ancient tapestry of motley weave \ Upon the open wall of this new land." This juxtaposition of "ancient" and "new" is, as I have previously maintained, another central motif of Ridge's ghetto. American newness, its open wall is contrasted with a people whose history is as "ancient" as their American experience is new. The ghetto as a "new" "feminized" space is also home to a patriarchal past, though one usurped by European (and hence American) exile, emancipation and subsequent assimilation. For every "young trader" peddling "the notions of the hour,"⁶⁷ there is "an old grey scholar," or "one who holds \ The wisdom of the

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The use of the word "notion" is interesting here, in addition to the phrase, "the notions of the hour." Notion, though meant here in reference to sewing notions, also means "ideas." Ridge's ghetto is full of "the notions of the hour" in terms of the new ideas adopted by the young and in circulations in the sweat shops, cafes, clubs. etc. Thus one who peddles notions is not someone who is merely employed in the sewing trade, but is someone who passes on the latest ideas to those he encounters. **nb.** I use the pronoun "he" because peddlars and ragpickers were almost always men.

Talmud stored away \ In his mind's lavender." And there are men like Old Sodos who have lost their trades through emigration, not to mention other reminders that one is amidst "that old race that has been thrust \ From off the curbstones of the world..." Yet, Ridge best articulates this distinction of old and new when she presents, in the sixth section, a "dingy cafe" where "the old men sit muffled in woollens." Here "young life and young thought are alike barred." The radicalism imported from Russia, advocated in the sweat shop and outside the ghetto walls is prohibited lest it should enter "trampling with sacrilegious feet!" Ridge is acutely conscious of the "ancient things" that the old men strive steadfastly to preserve: their Judaic traditions, the talmudic teachings that have become 'contaminated' through incessant exiles and emigrations.⁶⁸

Ridge also sees the influences these traditions and teachings have had on the developing revolutionary movements of her day. The young men engage in a clash of "Egos yet in the primer." Whereas the desire for change appears rather harmoniously when focused on women, Ridge seems to find the men's "majestic discordances" endearingly comic: Thus she informs us that there is dissension even among the

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Annelise Orleck partly addresses this contamination by stressing the important tension between traditional Jewish biblical values and the nineteenth-century radical philosophies of which Eastern European Jews became aware:

Jewish religious leaders were, at most, lukewarm to Socialism. But in the Jewish Socialism of the time there was a cross-fertilization of Biblical and Marxist imagery that made even men and women from religious homes feel comfortable with Socialist ideas and activism. Immigrant Jewish Socialism had its own language and symbols, a mixture of the ancient prophets and nineteenth-century revolutionaries (27).

dissenters:

One, red-bearded, rearing
 A welter of maimed face bashed in from some old wound,
 Garbles Max Stirner.⁶⁹
 His words knock each other like little wooden blocks.
 No one heeds him,
 And a lank boy with hair over his eyes
 Pounds upon the table.
 --He is chairman.

If these lines suggest the poet's intimate knowledge of radical organizing, consider the following comment Ridge makes to Harold Loeb upon contacting him about her position as American editor of Broom. Probably to sell herself as one efficient in handling chaos, she describes her experiences as an organizer for the Ferrer Association: "every new measure had to be put to the vote, and I had to fight hostile forces inside that mob of three hundred--mostly foreigners and all wild unkempt spirits, hailing from one another by its hair that new, wonderful doll, Liberty" (Avrich 92). In fact, elsewhere in "the Ghetto['s]" sixth section, Ridge gives a veteran organizer's attention to that "doll" "Liberty, \ Trailing her dissolving glory

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Max Stirner (1806-1856) was a German anarchist and author of The Ego and Its Own. This text, which appears in Ridge's book collection in the Bryn Mawr College Library, and which she had probably read shortly before "The Ghetto" first appeared, was published in 1846 and translated into English in 1897. Though the book caused a stir at the time of its publication and an interest in Stirner was revived after the book was translated into English, his absolute egoism and individualist stance turned off even most anarchists. According to Stirner: "Nothing is higher than myself;" "Every higher being whether God or man weakens the feeling of my own individuality;" "I don't do anything for God's sake, for man's sake, but for my own sake." Though Ridge was active in anarchist circles for a number of years, it is doubtful that she took any of his ideas seriously. In fact, the quick manner in which the "maimed" fellow who "garbles" Stirner is shouted down suggests that, at least in Ridge's observation, he was not popular amongst the young Jewish anarchists.

over each hard-won \ barricade-- \ Only to fade anew..." Ridge creates on the page a confrontational space in which to argue the difficulties of articulating and executing a program for social change. She reminds us that the battles of the poor, the disenfranchised, women, people of color are frequently losing ones. Acknowledging that "glory" dissolves, perhaps referencing her own political burn-out in the Ferrer Association, which she left in 1912, and "barricades" that fade, Ridge is also suggesting that the realist elements she has presented in this poem are often overshadowed by the splendor and spectacle of the image.

Whether the poem's closing section is spirited and celebratory; it parallels traditional Jewish advice throughout the ages: "Choose life."⁷⁰ It is a statement asking Jews the world over to live righteously. "LIFE" too is a word Ridge displays in the poem's denouement. At first the word is capitalized and rounded with an exclamation point. It is "Startling, vigorous." It is also "Articulate, shrill, \ Screaming in provocative assertion..." Life is a language, that polyphonic social landscape-- modern, urban and walled-in:

Electric currents of life,
 Throwing off thoughts like sparks,
 Glittering, disappearing,
 Making unknown circuits,
 Or out of spent particles stirring
 Feeble contortions in old faiths
 Passing before the new.

Life is the movement of the communal body of the ghetto in the city: "Life \ Pent \

⁷⁰ The full passage is "Choose life so you and your off-spring can live..." (Deuteronomy 29)

overflowing \ stoops and facades \ jostling, \ pushing, \ contriving \ Seething as in a great vat." The body is in constant motion, perpetual activity, discussion, disagreement: "Bartering, changing, extorting \ Dreaming, debating, aspiring \ Astounding, indestructible..." Not only does this metropolitan communal body celebrate life by heeding its struggles and its "majestic discordances," but the language by which it defines itself as a communal body is spoken almost entirely in the present continuous. This grammar is perhaps Ridge's strongest suggestion -- and hence the powerful impressions she leaves us with -- that this is a community in continuous formation. Thus Ridge's articulation of the working class Jewish community inside "the Ghetto" is one always producing potential, always a community of men and women making themselves in the world. Lola Ridge's "The Ghetto" sings the body electric of America's urban masses.

Lola Ridge published only five books of poetry in her life. Her productivity was continually interrupted by chronic illness. Critical assessment of her work was mixed throughout her relatively brief career, probably because Lola Ridge was not interested in being "fashionable." Yet her work was always topical. A fitting, largely unknown fact about Ridge is that she won the Shelley Memorial Prize two years in a row, in 1934 and 1935. In fact she was writing "proletarian poetry" decades before it became popular to do so during the Great Depression. After her death in May of 1941, Samuel A. DeWitt established the Lola Ridge Memorial Award, which was discontinued in 1950. The Cold War had begun in earnest and the names and

reputations of American poets on the left began to disappear. Post-war poetry anthologies, histories of modern American poetry, and literary biographies seemed to have forgotten she existed, or seemed not to have been impressed that when she died, her New York Times obituary stated that she was one of America's "leading contemporary poets."

The women's movement of the 1970s briefly brought Ridge back after her memory had been silenced for nearly thirty years. Her work appeared in two influential anthologies that came out during that important decade of "second wave" feminism: The Women Poets in English (1972), edited by Ann Stanford, and The World Split Open (1974), edited by Louise Bernikow. It would make sense that a new feminist movement would reclaim her. She had been, after all, a feminist, an anarchist, a divorcee. She had lived in a common-law union with a man twelve years her junior for close to a decade before they married legally. She had known Margaret Sanger, had done political work with Emma Goldman, had read Edward Carpenter and believed in "homosexual" rights. Although she had lived in poverty most of her writing life, she gave her last \$100 to the young Kay Boyle for an abortion. Yet, unlike other rebel girls, second wave feminism did not make Lola Ridge's name a household word.

Ridge's later works, starting with her allegorical book length poem on the Crucifixion, Firehead, to her sonnet cycle "Via Ignis," published in her final book Dance of Fire, as well as her travels to the near east and Mexico, reveal an interest in mysticism. "Via Ignis" somewhat cryptically explores her desire to connect history,

material culture and mysticism. The poem moves from ancient Babylon, to Renaissance Italy, to Mexico at the time of the conquistadors, to Revolutionary France, and ends in post-World War One Manhattan. It is significant that in 1935, in the middle of the Depression, as national socialism threatened Europe, Ridge, in writing of past and current 'dark' history, would remark that we "may come for a period, into a time of light" (Sproat 475). What would Lola Ridge have thought about the social and cultural revolutions of the West in the 1960s? She certainly would not have characterized the West today as having entered into such "a time of light."

Chapter Three

Calling Western Union: Party Lines and Private Lines in Genevieve Taggard's Poetry.

She speaks from all these faces
and from the center of a system of lives
who speak the desire of worlds moving unmade
(Muriel Rukeyser, "Anne Burlak")¹

I. To "speak to the desire of worlds moving unmade" might be the best way to categorize the aims of radical women poets writing during the Depression. The above lines, written in praise of the efforts of a female communist organizer, also suggest the ways in which words themselves create the possibility for action. For women to recognize their "lives" at "the center of a system" not only evokes the transformative power of dialogue, but of the necessary participation of women in any program for social change. Genevieve Taggard (1894-1948), an active left voice from the 1920s through the 1940s, whose work remains out of print and whose name has disappeared from our cultural memory, hoped to speak both to and for women.² She also hoped

¹

Muriel Rukeyser (1913-1980), a poet with a long career that spanned both periods of the old and new lefts, also belongs in a study such as mine. In fact her contribution to feminist social poetry is too important to be treated as one chapter of a dissertation. Anne Herzog's dissertation, *Faith and Resistance: Politics and the Poetry of Muriel Rukeyser* (1995), devoted exclusively to Rukeyser's leftist, feminist aesthetic is a major contribution to the recovery of a leading radical and feminist voice of modern American poetry.

²

Taggard published twelve books of verse, one a selection of her early verse, the other her collected poems published in 1938. She edited five books and wrote a biography of Emily Dickinson. She taught at Bennington College and Sarah Lawrence, where the anti-radical climate of post-war America forced her into early retirement. None of

to find a way to understand the clash between private and public worlds within which women poets would make their identities in the inter-war period. Taggard's activist voice, particularly during the 1930s, which no doubt helped to later bury her reputation as an important American poet, provides us with necessary information not only about the social crises of the decade, but of the participation of women writers and intellectuals in shaping its dialogue.

By focusing on the work Genevieve Taggard and her writing did as a poet/activist within the context of the Great Depression and its accompanying left-wing mass movements, I navigate the neglected territory of women's activist poetry of the 1930s. I remind readers of these women's commitment to representing themselves and the struggles that mattered to them. I do so by suggesting that Taggard's importance as a Depression era feminist poet is represented through her insistence upon merging the poetic line with the picket line--tropes I discuss within this chapter. To shed light upon the development of Taggard's radical consciousness, I will return to two works that reflect respectively on her earlier concerns--her Hawaiian childhood and her interest in the metaphysical poetry tradition. In fact, Calling Western Union is an important text because it not only reflects Taggard's interest in reading the Depression through both poetic and gendered lenses, but it also shows, through memoir and the inclusion of a poem previously published in the early twenties, a revision of her radical self to meet the demands of the increasingly

Taggard's books is presently in print; however Cary Nelson and his student, Karen Ford, are at work on a selection of Taggard's poems to be published in the University of Illinois Press's "American Poetry Recovery Series."

radicalized environment of the 1930s. While I connect Taggard's interest in women's participation in social struggle with her attempt to map out a female tradition, I also consider her cultural work as it reaches beyond gender and politics. Her interest in African American cultural practice as an inspiration to her own creation of a socially conscious aesthetic connects race to her classed and gendered work. I close the chapter with a series of poems Taggard wrote "to the Negro People," which appeared in Long View, the book that followed Calling Western Union in 1942.

Calling Western Union, published in 1936, created a space in which women's activities, both domestic and political, could be represented. Rebecca Pitts described Calling Western Union in her review in The New Masses: "The poems range from little satirical portraits of decay, through simple and moving records of poverty and sorrow, and militant chants of the masses, brave and unbeaten, to songs of the future which somehow clothe with emotional reality our dreams of collective living" (22). Pitts, who, like Taggard, wrote philosophical pieces on Communism for The New Masses (some on women in the communist movement), names a central concern of Taggard's thirties' verse, as images that "clothe...our dreams of collective living." Images of men and women moving together, through labor and through protest, dominate the text.

The collection's title also evokes the urgency and emergency of desperate times to which Taggard, as well as a large number of writers and artists bore witness. Poems became emergency messages sent via Western Union. In an age in which telecommunications was just beginning poems chanting headlines like telegrams were a

novel response to a rapidly changing world in crisis. During the Depression Genevieve Taggard decided that lines of poetry would be created "along the lines of" a social narrative. She would confront the aesthetic world of poetry and its "lines," with the materiality of everyday life. Poetry could no longer be written or thought of as merely "lines" of verse, or as a series of "lines" that extol an idea or "thing," as William Carlos Williams had insisted. Reading modern poetry in the middle of the Depression began to evoke other "lines." The poetry in Calling Western Union exposes us to bread lines, picket lines, and party lines (meaning the dogmatic strictures of certain left wing discourses) inextricably linked to lines of poetry. Taggard also saw how the domestic and social spaces inhabited by women were tied to these "lines." Women were confounded daily by material lack, and women poets like herself were confounded daily by the need to write poetic lines that must somehow address the private and public spaces contained inside the lines of the expectations of editors and readers about what poetry should and should not do. Importantly, the protest or picket line, a significant symbol of Depression culture, was a site where women, not since the suffrage campaign, could be found chanting their demands like lines of verse. Taggard's interest in working class politics expands the role of women and their "lines." Working class women, if they were not writing their own verses, were at least supporting or standing on picket lines. Taggard uses the poetic line to articulate the protest or picket line, and creates political subjectivity for women in her poems.

Throughout Calling Western Union, Taggard engages her readers through a

desire to stretch the lines of her poems out to the protest line, to merge "word" with "deed," as she tells us in "Life of the Mind, 1934." Her desire is to transform the isolated line of poetry into a script for collective chants. By making poetic lines themselves metaphors for social engagement, Taggard insists that protest lines and political lines, as they develop an alternative to the bread line and employment line, become the next "line" for poetry. Similarly by urging a new line for poetry, Taggard is also calling for a "new product." Given her interest in women, one might equate this new "product" line for poetry, as if it were the latest lipstick color. In "To My Daughter," with its epigraph "On Refusing to Take Out Life Insurance," Taggard attempts to complicate the conflation of poetic and protest line. By constructing a poem in which men, women, and children move together in protest, she asks poetry, now wedded to social action, to offer a "different insurance," as well as to rewrite the breadlines endemic to Depression life. Importantly, I would argue, Taggard's lines of poetry as they become merged with, conflated by, and extremely entangled within the social theatre of want and lack, begin to form their own discourse.

Not only does Taggard problematize both poetic and picket line, but she crosses class lines. In the poem "At Last the Women Are Moving," she celebrates middle-class women who have finally come out in protest, those seemingly disconnected from the struggles of their working-class sisters. Taggard is herself a middle-class writer crossing working-class lines in solidarity, taking the private middle class expression found in the poetic line and recharging it with the public energy

found in working class struggle. For example, in the poem, "Middle-Age Middle Class Woman at Midnight," she describes a woman, much like herself, who can't sleep thinking about the misery of striking marble workers. Interestingly, Taggard revises her stance as distanced observer, as "modernist" poet, by crossing into the territory of the popular, leaving behind the Eliotian figure of white male modernism as he cries "metaphor, metaphor why hast thou forsaken me." These quoted lines appear in the poem "Funeral in May," a satire on the individualist stance of poets writing in a time of national and global crisis. With this challenge to modernism's traditional canon, Taggard engages in uniting both private and public lines. She hopes to see those poetry lines traditionally associated with the domain of the individual, isolated poet, reach out to embrace public desire. She literally takes her writing *out on the line*.

Taggard constructs these politicized lines of poetry in a radical literary atmosphere in which the "party line" was debated by communist and other left-wing poets in terms of how to represent working-class subjectivity in their verses.³ "At Last the Women Are Moving" epitomizes the linguistic ambiguity of poetic line \

3

By the time Calling Western Union was published in 1936, two distinct left literary "lines" had developed. The New Masses, closely associated with the CPUSA, weakened its stance toward "Proleterian Realism" abetted by the Communist Party's rightward shift to accomodate a "popular front." On the other hand, radicals disillusioned with The New Masses' sectarianism started the Partisan Review. "The magazine would be free of any political ties and would be devoted to the most **advanced literature**, adopting the style of earlier magazines of aesthetic revolt" (Gilbert 159), (bold mine). Neither tendency, as both Constance Coiner and Paula Rabinowitz have argued, were able to "see" gender issues, or if they did, dismissed them as unimportant.

picket line. It not only gives voice to women's activism in Depression era America, but challenges both modernist and male left lyrics by politicizing the poetic line and gendering the picket line. The poem appears early within the pages of Calling Western Union and assumes the inevitability of women's participation in social struggle. In "At Last the Women Are Moving" Taggard acknowledges and constructs the importance, as well as complications, of, to use Sheila Rowbotham's dichotomous phrase, "women in movement." Movement is an important trope. It signifies the progress these women make, while they participate in the "progressive;" their moving will make a movement. The poem engenders female empowerment by presenting women in two stages--first, uncertainty and then, commitment. Its flow is direct, like the procession it describes--a protest march and women's enlisting in acts of resistance. Yet the poem does convey an ironic tone as it asks where have the women been--why have they been still? ("AT LAST" the women have come out). Taggard, in effect, wants her readers to consider the significance of these first steps, even if they are done with trepidation: "Last, walking with stiff legs." She also conveys the silence blocking women's entrance to public actions, which further emphasizes the importance of the women's neophyte steps because "Such women looked odd, marching on American \ asphalt." Thus Taggard's vocabulary stresses the awkwardness of movement--this last group in a procession of marchers--these "mothers, housewives, old women." Their clothes are "bunched," their steps "stiff" and "anxious." They "hobble," compared to the more experienced marchers (read men), who erectly bear "wide banners." Curiously, these "sexualized" bodies of men

are clichéd, so the entrance of these awkward women creates an anarchic twist to the smooth, masculine line of the procession. Taggard juxtaposes what the women normally "know"—"kitchens...sinks, suds...pennies"—as well as "Dull hurry and worry, clatter...back-ache" with the fact that they now have achieved a kind of parity of militancy with the men. Yet it is the newness of their participation, the oddity that they seem to represent, that makes their action—their presence—that much more powerful. These women, generally identified through the private body of the domestic sphere, become part of the larger public space; thus they are resituated as militant workers, and refigure *women's work* as *work*. Importantly, one of the underlying (and culminating) articulations of this poem is the absolute preparedness of all women, for the task of taking militant measures. Taggard rhetorically asks: "How did these timid, the slaves of breakfast and supper \ Get out in the line, drop for once dish-rag and broom? \ Here they are as work-worn as stitchers and fitters." (Their sisters and brothers who are "wage" laborers). She thus suggests that women belong here; their domestic responsibilities have paved their way to the line: "These, whose business is keeping the body alive, \ These are ready, if you talk their language, to strike." The poet ultimately wants her readers to see this private "language" of domestic life as converging with all the other languages of labor.⁴

4

The narrative line also is crossed by Meridel LeSueur in a work of short fiction from the 1930s, "I Was Marching." In the story, based on the Minneapolis teamsters strike of 1934, a middle-class woman goes to volunteer at the local union headquarters in order to support the "men." As she helps out, she begins to feel that her life has never been more useful. When she marches, she feels she is part of no greater thing on earth than this struggle to preserve worker's dignity. Like Taggard's poem in whose final lines the middle-class marcher admits that she has "come" for her "class,"

Taggard's attention to the movement of women's bodies is an important representation of where a number of women poets placed themselves in the 1930s. A wide spectrum of left newspapers and journals from the Communist Party paper, The Daily Worker, to the NAACP journal, The Crisis, published radical lyrics by women poets in which they reminded readers that gender (and race) were as much a part of the Depression landscape as were bread lines, picket lines, and employment lines. In fact these women's verses, written in a variety of styles, reflected the quotidian concerns of thirties readers. For example, Muriel Rukeyser's work refashions the fragmented modernist lyric into a brand of documentary reportage, which records the spread of silicosis in a West Virginia mining town; the voices of victims' wives and mothers, as well as the revered, authorial voices of labor agitators, speak through her pen. Lucia Trent's poetry, written in traditional forms such as the sonnet and ballad stanza, satirizes ruling class' indifference toward mass hunger and unemployment, and in "Breed, Women, Breed," represents women trapped in their reproductive role, breeding "for the owners of mills and the owners of mines" (Writing Red, 168). African-American poets like Margaret Walker and Gladys Casely Hayford sought to give voice to their working class sisters by exploring the harsh conditions of black female labor while also depicting the women's fortitude.⁵ Martha Millet, whose

LeSueur's final lines announce her protagonist's giddiness at the class lines she crosses in order to feel part of the struggle: "I felt my legs straighten. I felt my feet join in that strange shuffle of thousands of bodies moving with direction, of thousands of feet, and my own breath with the gigantic breath. As if an electric charge had passed through me, my hair stood on end, I was marching" (191).

⁵

See Charlotte Nekola's "Worlds Moving: Women, Poetry, and the Literary Politics

poems and articles appeared in Communist Party publications such as Working Woman and the women's pages of the Daily Worker, produced poetry to help encourage women's participation in mass actions. Still, as much as these women wrote, and however loudly their poems screamed issues of central importance to Depression-era women, their writing was overshadowed by male voices. "Proletarian Realism" as advocated by the communist movement's chief literary arbiter, Mike Gold,⁶ assumed a male body—the muscular, toiling sensibility of the male worker. In Gold's view, proletarian writing should be "masculine." Bourgeois writing was, for Gold, by definition "feminine;" it was self-reflexive and explored the nuances of language rather than examining and detailing the experience of labor.⁷ Yet while Gold

of the 1930s," in Writing Red: An Anthology of American Women Writers, 1930-1940. Charlotte Nekola and Paula Rabinowitz, eds., New York: Feminist Press, 1987.

6

Mike Gold (1893-1967) presented his ideas about "Proletarian Realism" in the April 1930 issue of the New Masses, which he founded and edited along with Joseph Freeman. Gold, who grew up in poverty on New York's Lower East Side and wrote about it in his immensely popular autobiographical novel Jews Without Money (1930), advocated a "Proletarian realism [that] deals with the *real conflicts* of men and women who work for a living." He set this desire for a working class literature against a "literature for its own sake." He argued that "workers will scorn any vague fumbling poetry, much as they would scorn a sloppy workman." Literature should be "useful," and have a "social function," with "as few words as possible"—no "verbal acrobatics." Gold might encapsulate "Proletarian Realism" as "swift action, clear form, the direct line, cinema in words." The world should not be represented with "pessimism," as the bourgeois writer does, but with "revolutionary elan" (all quotes from Coiner, Better Red, 23-24). For a current, detailed discussion of Gold's political and aesthetic project see James Bloom's Left Letters: The Culture Wars of Michael Gold and Joseph Freeman. New York: Columbia UP, 1994).

7

Gold's masculine reading of thirties culture is shared by a number of male poets of the period. Two writers whose work appears in the 1978 anthology, Social Poetry of

exalted the young workers writing in "jets of exasperated feeling" (but with "no time to polish") ("Go Left..." 51), women's "proletarian" poetry about "feeding the children," joining the pickets, selling their wares (and their bodies), and fighting for a new world alongside their men, was ignored by both the radical literary circles under Gold's persuasive gaze, and the "bourgeois" tradition he detested.

It is additionally important to recall that as women eased into their positions on the "line," they also challenge the claim that an activist role for women disappeared after 1920 when the 19th amendment, granting suffrage to adult women, was ratified. Just as Lola Ridge's anti-death penalty, anti-lynching, pro-worker lyrics of the 1920s suggest that women still actively engaged in public discourses, Genevieve Taggard, by 1925, when she edited May Days, an anthology of poetry from The Masses and The Liberator, Left magazines with which she was associated, had become an active participant in left cultural debates about transforming society in the wake of widespread feelings that Capitalism had failed. When the New Masses was founded in 1926 she became (along with Lola Ridge and a long list of other left oriented writers)

the 1930s, signal the sexist and homophobic outlook found in literary radical circles. The Missouri farm poet H.H. Lewis, in poems of praise written to the Soviet Union, metaphorizes "mother Russia" as a robust "masculine" woman. He idealizes the Soviet woman as a strong, laboring mother who has no time for the "femininity" constructed by the bourgeois world. Robert Gessner, later to become a New York University film professor, in "Upsurge," a quintessential Depression poem, depicts destitute, unemployed men who have "gone to other men" in their despair. Homosexuality becomes the ultimate symbolic trope through which the poet represents a man's degradation at this historical crisis point. The Communist Party's anti-gay agenda made sexual radicalism taboo. Out in the Party meant, "out" of the Party.

a contributing editor.⁸ In fact, New Masses founders, Mike Gold and Joseph Freeman, had been supporters of Taggard's early work. Taggard published her first book in 1922, and wrote or edited 18 books in her relatively brief life -- she was only 52 when she died in 1948 -- seven of these appeared in the 1920s alone. Though Taggard published her significant volumes of poetry with an important publisher (Harper Brothers) and frequently read her work "over the air," she is best known by scholars for her biography of Emily Dickinson, which she published in 1930. When asked to describe her reception as a poet in Twentieth Century Authors (1942) she remarked: "When I face the fact my poetry is not very much read in my own country I console myself by the fact that my work has been translated into many foreign languages" (1381). Taggard was also an internationalist. She desired to see herself as part of the "excellence of world literature," while acknowledging that the American literary culture of her time was stuffy, elitist and removed from "the life and talents of the American people." Curiously Taggard's description of herself as "unread," contradicts the very active connection that Cary Nelson notes left poets had with their audiences during the Depression. "For a brief moment in American literary history,"

8

An important political difference between Lola Ridge and Genevieve Taggard is perhaps best evoked in their relationship to the New Masses. While both poets were contributing editors during the magazine's first three years, Lola Ridge's name disappears from the mast-head. As Marcus Klein writes in Foreigners, though the magazine "was never to be a Party journal by official designation, by 1930 it was accepting editorial policy from the International Bureau of Revolutionary Literature, which was to say the Comintern" (82). While Ridge's anarchist politics no doubt made her suspicious of the "authoritarian" suggestion of having one official line influencing a magazine's decision making, Taggard, who became even more involved with the magazine after 1930, seemed quite able to work within its narrowing parameters.

he writes, "writing poetry became a credible form of revolutionary action. Reading poetry, in turn, became a way of positioning one's self in relation to the possibility of basic social change" (32). Taggard no doubt saw herself marginalized within a modernist tradition that devalued the kind of work the Depression consistently asked her to produce. Yet, regardless of whether Taggard was able to see herself from outside the canonical modernist and masculinist gaze, she nonetheless participated in an aesthetic campaign that was "paradoxically, one of the triumphs of a time of widespread suffering" (Nelson 34). Though Genevieve Taggard may have been neglected by the conventional canons of American modernism, she was embraced and appreciated by women, working class, and those otherwise marginalized readers who recognized themselves and their struggles in her poetic articulations. Though it is hard to imagine now, there was a lively culture of class-centered writing and reading in the thirties in the United States and internationally.

II. The Depression in the United States brought devastating changes to the lives of ordinary women and men. Writers like Taggard, sensitive to the social demolitions they saw exponentially increasing, altered their aesthetic practice to reflect the bleak realities they witnessed daily. The Communist Party, with its many organizing campaigns, its John Reed Clubs, and its little magazines, began to inspire and create a sense of identity for those writers concerned about the culture of deprivation the Depression had created. Women's, issues, concerns central to both Taggard and to my discussion, are decidedly absent from the Party's particularly androcentric agenda.

Though it would be shortsighted to maintain that Calling Western Union is written mainly with Taggard's feminist interests in mind, my readings of poems from this collection center upon those that engage, not to mention merge, gender and class concerns, as in the poem, "At Last the Women Are Moving." Taggard's thirties verse never advocates a feminism separate from her interest in communism, yet her insistence in writing women into the spaces of radical literature is evident in poems like "Feeding the Children," which complicates women's inscription within the domestic sphere. This is a way that Taggard begins to challenge the "party line," even as she remained a committed communist, though not a Party member.

Whereas "At Last the Women Are Moving" presents the protest line as new but possible place for women in the public sphere, "Feeding the Children," in an attempt to represent the complex interstitial spaces between the private and the public, both justifies and condemns women's reticence to engage in social action. "Women are conservative," she begins. ... "They want life to go on. . . Groceries \ Are important, and milk delivered each morning." Yet Taggard's emphasis on "conservative" has little to do with any political orthodoxies or theories; she uses "conservative" in the sense that women's obligation to their families places them in a precarious position of mediation: "I must feed my children. Keep the peace." Yet as the radical's outlook on conservatism maintains, traditions can stand in the way of action, of change. These women as they rightfully acknowledge responsibility also "frown at strikes" and "oppose \ Sacrifice outside family." However, like the women in "At Last the Women are Moving," these housewives too become witness to the

trickle- down effects of the 'mean economy.' The strike their husbands entertain ("risk your job for nothing, starve my babies!" \ ... "Tear up your card!) shortly becomes the very fight to "feed" the children and "Keep the peace." The word "feed" as it is juxtaposed with the word "peace" intimates the very clash that is at the center of these women's dilemma. Can there be peace when there is hunger? In a Depression-era setting of declining wages, rising prices and massive shortages of necessary staples, Taggard inserts her economic critique as it specifically speaks to women:

Now the egg-shell wall of home-sweet-home, holy and
humble,
Cracks with the price of meat, the lack of milk.
Out in the street they demonstrate her question.
Food, clothes, beds . . . The picket-line is the
answer.

Ultimately privation consumes these "conservative" women, and they come around to the idea of social action. The poem's final stanza finds them transformed into fighting Union wives: "We must feed the children. March today."

In "Feeding the Children," the end lines, from the penultimate and final stanzas-- "The picket-line is the answer" and "Vote the strike!"--suggest sloganeering rather than the subtle textures and veiled meanings of canonical modernist verse (as well as other verse that is outside my concern here). As is implied in the text's title Calling Western Union, she creates lines intended to carry urgent social messages. Taggard resists modernist distancing as a way to offer direct engagement with her readers, particularly those Depression mothers who are worrying about *feeding the children*.⁹ The lines, instead, record the popular voice. They contain elements of the

chant shouted by protest marchers since at least the early 19th century. For the poet who understands that she must "talk their language," lines that chant within the given social reality that they address, enliven the poem and connect it to its readers. These chant-like verses, which may appear jarring to a reader taught to dissociate art from propaganda, enable the writer to subvert the complacent expectancy of both the domestic sphere she sees women attempting to transform, and the stodgy literary codes that eschew both political and popular expression.¹⁰ Whatever the light in which her critics may wish to cast her, Genevieve Taggard did believe that the picket line was the answer. Her rather sanguine views of the significance of the labor movement and

9

The use of *sloganeering* in modern American poetry is wonderfully synthesized and problematized by Cary Nelson in his essay *Literature as Cultural Studies: "American" Poetry of the Spanish Civil War*. He maintains that the poetry produced internationally in solidarity with the Spanish Republic during the war years (1936-1939) implicitly, rather than explicitly, integrated sloganeering. The worldwide support of the Spanish Republic inspired a poetic discourse that "circulate[d] from street and newspaper into poems and back to the street again." It merged with the transnational public dialogue on the fight against fascism. "In the process the slogans are infused with all the values poetry itself has historically acquired, and the slogans become not merely instrumental but also literary, lyrical signposts of a history already eternal and monumentalized. And their deployment in the street thereafter has the feel of poetry as work in public life" (85).

10

It would be impossible to mention all the forgotten American verse of the period 1915-1945 that contained elements of song, which also included social messages. For example, James Oppenheim's "Bread and Roses" was inspired by the women marchers during the 1912 textile strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts. The Italian-American anarchist poet, Arturo Giovanitti also wrote ballads while in prison for his activism on behalf of the Lawrence strikers. Sarah Cleghorn's Songs of Peace and Freedom was penned as part of a resistance campaign against the first world war. Ralph Chaplin, poet laureate of the I.W.W., authored "Solidarity Forever," a ballad still sung today in AFL-CIO circles. Langston Hughes' first book of poems, The Weary Blues, mixes both the folk idioms of blues music with chants against racial inequality.

the inevitability of an American labor party were expressed in an unpublished (?) article, "Night Thoughts Over America," written in the late thirties after a transcontinental airplane flight.¹¹ Looking down over the American Depression landscape the poet muses about the nation's wealth, resources and possibilities, of course laced with the contradictions of its vast poverty and unemployment. "The picket line is the new frontier," she writes. "Hardships. Spunk. Intelligence. A world to win. Here the struggles of the still living American democratic spirit will center" (20). In this regard, Taggard also evokes a poetry that is collective. She attempts to extend the solitary voice of a poem's speaker to a collective voice -- toward lines that can be chanted.

One particular struggle "of the...living American democratic spirit," in which Taggard was both active participant and poetic observer was the 1936 marble workers strike in Rutland, Vermont. "Feeding the Children," and a few other poems I explore later, appear to have been composed in direct response to what Taggard witnessed as a member of the *United Committee to Aid Vermont Marble Workers*. Taggard had specific connections to Vermont—she had taught at Bennington College from 1931 to 1935 and had bought a farm there, in East Jamaica. Though little scholarly attention has been paid to this strike, Genevieve Taggard did help to write some of its history, not only through her poetry but through her participation on the strike committee.

11

A typescript copy of the essay, with Taggard's corrections, is in the Genevieve Taggard Collection at the New York Public Library. There is no date on it, but the events she describes in the essay situate it between 1938 and 1939. **nb** It was Taggard's first flight.

Importantly, the committee organized a hearing in which the workers and union officials could air their grievances. Though the marble bosses and government officials were invited to participate, none did. The hearing produced the "Verbatim Report of Public Hearing, Town Hall, West Rutland, Vermont, Feb. 29, 1936,"¹² a document that exemplified how the organizers, workers, wives, and committee members helped to write the strike's history. The initial dispute began, according to one West Rutland Union official, in early 1934 when the Vermont Marble Company refused to recognize the worker's right to organize and "tried to hoist...a company union on [them]" (4).

On November 4, 1935, some 600 quarry and marble workers of the towns of Danby, Rutland, West Rutland, Center Rutland, Proctor and Florence, Vt. went on strike against the Vermont Marble Company, owned by the Proctor family. They were faced with unusual difficulties — tight company control of the marble industry and the political situation, lack of experience in industrial dispute, complete absence of governmental relief to the destitute, and an exceptionally severe winter (n.p.).

Genevieve Taggard's task as committee member was one of confrontation—though she had little success. She was asked to interview Mr. Proctor, the Vermont Marble Company president as well as a Mr. Williams, the company treasurer. Mr. Proctor was "out of town." Mr. Williams "had no desire to be called to the phone," and another contact, a Mr. Frank Partridge, had nothing to say to a member of "this

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A copy of the report is in the Genevieve Taggard Book Collection at the Dartmouth College Library. **nb** Other noted sponsors of the United Committee to Aid Vermont Marble Workers included: Roger Baldwin, Sarah Cleghorn, Malcolm Cowley, Martha Gruening, Josephine Herbst, Alice Mary Kimball, Archibald Macleish, and Lewis Mumford.

delegation," nor did he think would anyone else. It appears that Taggard's encounter with the company bosses fueled her desire to chant lines of hope and solidarity with those victimized by harsh economic conditions only exacerbated by one powerful family's greed. A number of poems in Calling Western Union, which are not directly connected to labor struggles such as the Vermont strike, contain an air of sarcasm toward upper-class snobbery, middle-class indifference, and general social lethargy. Such verses, it seems, are there to remind readers of those, as was said in the 1960s, who were part of the problem, rather than the solution.

The strike was already into its third month at the time of the hearing. Discussions were particularly focused upon police brutality by drunken deputies that the company had hired essentially to provoke the strikers. A bloody battle ensued when the deputies set upon the men, slugging them "without any proclamation or orders to disperse." Five men were knocked unconscious and had to be "sewed up in the hospital" (5). A 75 year old rag-picker complained of being knocked down and bloodied by the deputies. Another prominent focus of the hearing was wage discrepancy. While the marble workers were unable to feed themselves and their families, the Vermont Marble Company incurred considerable profits. Ironically, an important argument that also surfaced was that while the workers, their wives, and children starved, the company made hundreds of thousands of dollars supplying marble to the government so it could build new, and refurbish old, "halls of justice."

It is important to connect the Vermont strike to Taggard's interest in representing the concerns of Depression women, and I want to highlight certain

representing the concerns of Depression women, and I want to highlight certain aspects of the strike that pertain to them. No doubt the "women in the various communities involved in the strike" (22), whose testimony may have been brief, inspired Taggard in constructing women's complaints for a number of the poems in Calling Western Union. Rockwell Kent, a prominent left-wing artist and one of the organizers of the hearing, illustrated the front cover of the committee report, which was later published and distributed. The cover shows Kent's characteristic style of stark, streamlined figures. A statuesque woman carries an infant wrapped and crooked into her left arm; in her large right hand she clutches the tiny paw of a scrawny female child. Two other children, a boy and girl who appear mostly in shadow, flank her on each side. What Kent's illustration depicts on the cover of the committee report is documented by the testimony therein of one Mrs. Mereau.¹³ Mrs. Mereau (who took the stand with a baby in her arms) contended that the Union had been responsible for supporting the striker's families until they received relief from the state—the infamous relief that more often than not was **not** given to the needy who requested it. Mrs. Mereau, with babe in arms, testifying to the committee with statements about hunger and hopelessness ("We have enough potatoes for supper for the children tonight. None for tomorrow" (22)) exemplifies an important trope of

13

It is worth noting that names of the women interviewed, Mereau and Bujak, suggest that they, their striking husbands, and starving children were immigrant "strangers" in the WASP land of the Proctors.

Depression life generously used by writers and artists of the period.¹⁴ Her testimony, more than describing the lack that families of the strikers as well as the generic family on relief had come to experience, also depicts social attitudes towards working class families harbored by the state institutions and industry owning families to whom the destitute were in thrall. As suggested in her following response about her difficulties feeding and clothing her children, Mrs. Mereau claims the right of working class women to the essential dignity no doubt considered sacrosanct to families such as the Proctors.¹⁵ Indeed it is documentary evidence of what Taggard stridently invents in "Feeding the Children:"

[I received] two quarts of milk a day, then they cut it down to one and said [the children] could drink water. I asked for underwear for the children. [They] said they could wear BVD-s, they were good enough for them. We got one set of heavy underwear to go to school in; he told us to put the children to bed Saturday night, wash the clothes and dry them before they needed them for school. We asked for stockings and mittens and suits, and they didn't give them to us (27).

¹⁴

Images of the grieving, impoverished, or determined mother circulated in much Depression era art and literature. In America one recalls feisty Ma Joad in The Grapes of Wrath or Dorothea Lange's famous WPA photograph of the California migrant mother, who at 33 looked closer to 53. In Germany, Brecht's Mother Courage complicated the idealization of the destitute mother, by portraying her as earning her keep through the ravages of war. Kathe Kollwitz's bronze sculpture "Tower of Mothers" depicts a grouping of babushka wearing women protectively encircling many young children. Moreover, the trope of "Mother Russia" was used in much "Popular Front" art and literature.

¹⁵ Committee member Isadore Polier made the following comment to fellow members about the living conditions in the region:

In the course of a half hour this morning I interviewed people from several towns and found uniformly a story of inadequate diet. As to houses, one witness said the house used to be barn. I said, "a real barn?" She said, "Yes, it is still painted red" (29).

Another of the striker's wives, a Mrs. Bujak, corroborated Mrs. Mereau's testimony. She claimed she could no longer send her children to school because they had no warm clothes. Moreover, she told those present at the hearing that when she went to the Overseer of the Poor to request relief she was told that she was not eligible because she owned her own house.¹⁶ (As Taggard reminds us in the preface to Calling Western Union: "In Rutland County the Overseer of the Poor is a Marble Company official"). Another woman, Mrs. Felyeo, discussed the difficulty of getting food. She requested relief from the authorities "three or four times" without success and informs the committee of her continued frustration:

Last Thursday we went over to the Overseer of the Poor, Mr. Bromley, and we walked about seven miles to find him in the woods. He gave a small order of a half-bushel of potatoes, one sack flour, two oleomargarine, and two yeast cakes. He gave us the order to go down to the store and get this stuff. When we got down there we could not lug the flour home and also the potatoes. The storekeeper was supposed to bring it up in the morning. When we got home when we could get the food, the flour had not come. Only half the order turned up (25).

The women's testimony provides only a fraction of evidence in the thirty plus page document that the committee produced, but it provides an important look into the domestic sphere as a Depression trope. For Taggard, it seems that the laboring bodies of men in the quarries and the activist bodies of men on the picket lines, as they are predictable signs of Depression life, become complete representations only when they

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The majority of the workers at the Vermont Marble Company lived in houses owned by the company. **nb** It was revealed in Mrs. Bujak's testimony and by committee members that this Overseer, Mr. Dwyer, had been tried and convicted of not providing relief to those in need. He was fined \$60. His lawyer was the same lawyer who represented the town of Central Rutland and the Vermont Marble Company.

are conjoined with the laboring bodies of women attempting to clothe and "feed the children."

When Taggard's representation of the "maternal" is linked to the politics outside the text, as I do here, then we can see that Calling Western Union reads women through both radical activity and domestic desire. Shortly before the book's publication, the Communist Party shifted its focus "from the Third Period's emphasis on working-class revolution to the Popular Front's struggle against fascism," which saw a transformation from concern with "revolutionary girls" to "partisan mothers" (Rabinowitz, 55). Since Taggard's poems combine the concerns of both periods in question, it is difficult to know whether as a non-party radical she felt obligated to follow Party prescriptions. The same year that Calling Western Union was published, Taggard visited Soviet Russia. In an interview with poet Martha Millet, printed in the Daily Worker shortly after her return, Taggard praised the gains Russian women had made, claiming that there was no "woman's problem" there. Women participated fully in all cultural endeavors with men, and had equal access to traditional men's jobs such as flying planes, driving "trucks and street cars," "parachute" jumping, as well as editorial and technical work; she added that "of course" they were paid "the same as men for the same work" (13). Yet perhaps her highest praise was reserved for the treatment of mothers and their children: there were maternity and health insurance such as could not be hoped for in America "under any reform government," not to mention child care instead of child labor (13). Yet under whose tutelage did Taggard see Soviet Russia? Paula Rabinowitz, critiquing the CPUSA's glorification of

motherhood, reminds us that by 1935 "Stalin had abolished many of the most progressive elements of the 1926 Family Code by making abortion and homosexuality illegal and by curtailing divorce"(7).¹⁷ Were Taggard's interests in women merely centered upon economy and maternity? Her uncritical response to stepped-up repression of women's freedom suggests that while she shows mothers liberated through their willingness to take collective action, she manages to follow a communist orthodoxy that puts restrictions upon women's **personal** freedom.

Returning to the marble workers' strike, and its connection to the poems in Calling Western Union, I examine what Paula Rabinowitz rightly maintains to be the important documentary tendency of 30's radical intellectuals: "By creating a rapport between the direct experiences of those who suffered and struggled and the writers who came into contact with them, reportage served to link the breadlines to the headlines." Rabinowitz contends that the various genres of fiction, drama and poetry "sought to re-create the immediacy and power offered by the direct testimony of reportage" (2). In fact Rabinowitz examines Taggard's own "intellectual" metaphor for documenting action, "word-in-deed," from her poem "Life of the Mind, 1934," which I discuss later.¹⁸ Rabinowitz complicates the netherworld of the woman

¹⁷

Rabinowitz outlines some of the discussion about gender that took place in Party circles and in the pages of The New Masses in her essay, "Women and U.S. Literary Radicalism," in Writing Red: an Anthology of American Women Writers, 1930-1940. Charlotte Nekola and Paula Rabinowitz, eds. New York: Feminist Press, 1987.

¹⁸

Rabinowitz's critical, theoretical, and historical study, Labor and Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression, is an answer to the left literary history coming out of the late fifties and sixties that managed to leave out the work of radical women

intellectual with the androcentric male left's inability to reconcile the contributions of intellectuals in general with its predilection for masculine images of direct action.

"For women writers, as for all leftist intellectuals," she maintains

the Depression functioned as the political ground onto which the figure of personal aesthetic response was etched. This response dwelled in contradictions -- between personal experience (the body) and political doctrine (the text), and between personal witness inscribed in the (narrative) urge to act (41).

Women intellectuals like Genevieve Taggard "who wrote about their working class sisters" embodied this dichotomy between "word" and "deed," (the personal and the political), as part of the "substance of their writings" (42). Taggard's thirties verses -- indeed the poems I examine in Calling Western Union -- often chant like headlines, while inscribing the theatre of social deprivation evidenced in the headline. They describe women empowered by strikes and mass actions, and link poetic language to the social viability of reportage. In fact, Taggard as a committed Marxist and signer of the call for an American Writers Congress (to combat "the new wave of race hatred, the organized anti-Communist campaign and the growth of Fascism") (313) seems to have developed, through her radical affiliations, a desire to work with the aesthetic agenda endorsed by certain Communist literati. A few poems I examine, including "At Last the Women Are Moving" and "Feeding the Children," in varying degrees, utilize a formula, in effect, a translation of proletarian narratives into the cadences of modernist verse. Yet Taggard, unlike most party writers, sees it necessary to include women within this "formula," which (roughly) presents them, in

women's positions as radical intellectuals.

the first half of the poem, as timorous or even hostile to the idea of strikes and other forms of social activism. As the poem progresses, through their own experience with shortages, hunger, or even emotional fatigue, the women realize their social victimization and join those already 'enlightened' men and women in action.

What is significant about Taggard's attention to this particular narrative of progressive enlightenment is that she generally does not construct the poems so that this propagandistic agenda is its most obvious aspect. Nor does she adhere merely to an agenda that is completely *realist*. Familiar modernist tropes such as ambiguity and irony, fragmented speech and fractured lines invade her representations of class struggle. In fact, one critic, reviewing Calling Western Union for The New Republic, described the poems as "so truncated and subtle that only a poet like the one [Taggard] gleefully buries in "Funeral in May" would be capable of the discriminating response which their refractory method seems to presuppose" (324). "Funeral in May," the poem to which the reviewer refers, though hardly representative of the social and popular aims of Calling Western Union as a whole, is Taggard's critique of the modernist poet's assertions of individuality as well as displacement. Taggard, in fact, attempts to take modernist music along with her on the picket line. The ironic tones and sense of estrangement represented by the solitary, apolitical figure characterized in "Funeral in May" is also evidenced in poems like "Adding Up America--You Try," and "Sing Lullaby," which castigate those who exist ignorantly and unfeelingly between bread lines and protest lines. With these more subtle critiques, she hopes to dispel the myth that the modern lyric needs to be *objective*, and

the poetic line distanced from the protest line.

Taggard's attempt to work with and yet refigure the proletarian formula is evident in the self-revelatory "A Middle-Aged, Middle-Class Woman at Midnight," a poem that was also inspired by the Vermont marble workers' strike. The poem articulates Taggard's own position as a middle-class artist while it explores her relationship to the dispossessed. In "A Middle-Aged, Middle-Class Woman at Midnight" Taggard poignantly constructs her difference from the women moving "en masse." The fervent anticipation of "At Last the Women are Moving" dissipates into alienated longing in this particular poem. The poem's speaker, a woman resigned to a "middle" ground where tranquilizers spell comfort, contemplates the coldness of her space:

In the middle of winter, middle of night
A woman took veronal in vain. How hard it is to
sleep
If you once think of the cold, continent-wide
Iron bitter. Ten below. Here in bed I stiffen.

With "continent-wide \ Iron bitter" a metaphor for a Depression winter that leaves a middle-class woman sleepless, Taggard then juxtaposes the subjectivities of rich and poor against the realities of mid-winter Vermont where workers at the Vermont Marble Company have been on strike: "It was a mink-coat Christmas said the papers...\ Heated taxis and orchids. Stealthy cold, old terror \ Of the poor, and especially the children." Still her desire to medicate stems from an anxious awareness: "In Vermont near the marble-quarries...I must \ not think..." In fact the speaker bears witness to starving men, women and children, to "Hunger that has no

haste..." It is this anxiety through which Taggard creates the speaker's somewhat ambiguous position. The poem, much like its appearance in the pages of Calling Western Union, splits in two (similar in formula to "Feeding the Children"). It begins with the speaker's desire to medicate herself as a form of removal, as if to announce that class difference isolates her from these striking workers. Nonetheless, her sympathies emerge. The reader, about to turn the page, discovers that the starving children become "our" children; the capitalist way of life, which has traditionally provided comfort to the middle classes, becomes the culprit: "In the Ford \ towns \ They shrivel. Their fathers accept tear gas and black-\jacks." Thus Taggard draws a connection between hunger's "shrivelling" affects upon children, and the police violence against the striking workers: "When they sleep, whimper. Bad sleep for us all." What begins as a poem in which a woman moans "O medicine \ Give blank against that fact," assuming medication is the way to live through "the strike, the cold," approaches its denouement in teleological reflection. There is someone responsible for this misery--the hunger that "haunt[s] the houses of farmers, \ destroyers \ Of crops by plan." The folks in the city have been victimized too. And the voice of the "middle-aged, middle-class woman" floats through them: "Veronal \ Costs money, too. Costs more than I can pay." The angry speaker, guilty by association, cannot afford another "night's long nightmare." The costs of poverty are too much. She sets her allegiances with the people exploited by those she holds responsible for the metaphoric poverty of her sleeplessness, connecting it with the more dire poverty of the strikers and their families: "Sheriffs, cops, \ Boss of the

town, union enemy, crooks and cousins." Moreover, she chants as finale, a line so "unpoetic" it asks us, as do so many of the other poems from Calling Western Union, to re-examine how we have been using the concept "poetic:" "I hope the people win."

Taggard also explores the middle-class subject in the poem "Interior." Yet the self-castigation that floats through "Middle-Age, Middle Class Woman..." is directed away from the author and projected upon an anonymous, apolitical, "you." "A middle-class fortress in which to hide!," she begins, exclaiming the isolation of middle-class life through its metaphoric rampart, complete with a curtain that shrouds it "as if saying **No.**" "Noon" which is "ablaze, ablaze outside," is the important center of engagement where "outside people work and sweat." Yet Taggard's complicated contempt for middle-class isolation expresses itself most pointedly through images of a kind of feminine vanity and slothful emptiness:

And after you doze brush out your hair
And walk like a marmoset to and fro
And look in the mirror at middle-age
And sit and regard yourself and stare and stare
And hate your life and your tiresome friends
And last night's bridge where you went in debt;
While all around you gathers the rage
Of cheated people.

The repetition of "And" captures the mundane drone of the idle middle-class that Taggard sets against those who are being "cheated." With these sentiments she echoes Proletarian Realist writers who often portrayed middle class characters or referred to middle-class sensibility as impotent, ineffectual, non-committal and lethargic. These descriptions of weakness were then paired against portrayals of the working-class as always tough, always resilient, and always downtrodden. Interestingly, Taggard ends

this poem also with the trope of mass action. The final reproach is both snide and absolute: "Will we hear your feet \ In the rising noise of the streets? Oh no!" The streets become the dividing line for those willing to *blow the trumpet all the way*, to paraphrase Meridel LeSueur from her essay "The Fetish of Being Outside,"¹⁹ and those who hide comfortably behind their vanities inside their fortresses, mumbling to themselves in low tones, "Oh no!"

The poem "Mill Town" returns us more directly to the site of labor struggle, and here Taggard scrutinizes women not through their disinterestedness, but rather through their helplessness. The poem appears to have been inspired not only by Taggard's activities on behalf of the working class families of the Vermont Marble Company, but by the work of medical historian, Paul de Kruif, to whom the poem is dedicated.²⁰ In fact she introduces the poem with an epigraph from de Kruif's book on child health and welfare, Why Keep Them Alive? (1936): "...the child died, the investigator said, for lack of proper food. After the funeral the mother went back to the mill. She is expecting another child..." Taggard begins the poem as an accompaniment to de Kruif's dispiriting scenario, imagining the woman whose "womb

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The essay, a response to poet Horace Gregory's defence of certain middle class writers decisions not to join the Communist Party, appeared in the February 14, 1935 issue of The New Masses.

²⁰

Paul de Kruif (1890-1971) wrote on a variety of health related issues from individuals who made medical history, Hunger Fighters (1928); Men Against Death (1933); and Kaiser Wakes the Doctors (1943), about industrialist Henry Kaiser's employee health care plan that gave birth to the first HMO, to a history of public health in the United States, The Fight for Life (1938). In 1962 he published a memoir, The Sweeping Wind. nb Why Keep Them Alive was written in collaboration with his wife, Rhea.

is sick of its work with death:"

. . . then fold up without pause
The colored gingham and the underclothes.
And from the stale
Depth of the dresser, smelling of medicine, take
The first year's garments. And by this act prepare
Your store of pain, your weariness, dull love,
To bear another child with doubled fists
And sucking face...

"Mill Town" provides a gendered vocabulary of working class experience, for the word "labor" is a double entendre. The woman of this "mill town" experiences both the excessive strains of wage-labor as well as that of repeated childbirth. Though these opening lines explore domestic routine, the infant's tight rage is a reminder of the tenuous grasp the Depression mother has on the domestic milieu. Yet, the poem's following (and last) seven lines evince a rather ambiguous attitude toward the woman's poverty. It seems unlikely that Taggard would intentionally reprimand the mill mother for her passivity. Her sympathetic eye for working class conditions as they effect women and children would provide a more critically engaged treatment of her subject's miserable circumstances. Ironically, the scolding tone stands out in these last lines. Since nowhere else in Calling Western Union does Taggard take the male left to task for its insensitivity towards gender concerns, it is unlikely she hoped to appropriate their voice, chiding the woman for not politicizing her position. In my reading, the speaker's reproachful tone suggests Taggard's appropriation of the voice of a hypocritical and judgmental social order, which rebukes working class mothers who become pregnant again and again in an atmosphere of economic want.

Clearly it is best, mill mother,

Not to rebel or ask clear silly questions.
 Saying womb is sick of its work with death,
 Your body drugged with work and the repeated bitter
 Gall of your morning vomit. Never try
 Asking if we should blame you. Live in fear. And put
 Soap on the yellowed blankets. Rub them pure.

Interestingly, the poem offers negative representation of the female body; childbearing and mill-work take serious toll upon it. In childbirth it readies its "store of pain"... "weariness," and "dull love," and negative too are the 'fruits' of its labor. Indeed this "store of pain," one of Taggard's most disturbing images, exposes the womb as complicit in life as death; the "mill-mother" gives birth to children who then die of starvation. Thus the female body "drugged with work" and incapacitated by morning sickness also represents the isolation of those women whose participation in social struggle appears to be eclipsed by domestic burdens, which are officiated by inequalities of class and gender—a "womb sick of its work with death."

"Mill Town" presents perhaps the bleakest portrait of working class life in Calling Western Union. It also complicates Taggard's desire to create a sense of hope in her readers, as well as keep with the objectives of the proletarian literature of the period to present the working class as progressive agents determined to usher in a new age and new culture. She never claims, as did socialist and feminist writer Crystal Eastman in the early twenties, that if and when Capitalism fell, women would still be enslaved.²¹ Yet her portrait of the captive mill-mother placed alongside a majority of

²¹ Crystal Eastman (1881-1928) was an outspoken feminist, socialist, and pacifist journalist and legal scholar. See Blanche Cook's introduction to, Crystal Eastman on Women and Revolution. New York: Oxford UP, 1979.

poems whose themes are positive and optimistic, that speak towards a yet unrealized future of "multitude and no tumult," as she writes in "Four Frescoes of the Future," is perhaps a distant reminder of the complexities of the mission to take, to make, and "return \ In the name of the living. In the name of our span."

III. The poems directly or indirectly inspired by the marble worker's strike in Rutland, Vermont suggest another important positional demarcation for Taggard's radical verse. The politics of location play a major part in constructing her literary identity. While Taggard lived and wrote in New York City for most of her adult life, Hawaii, Washington State, California, and Vermont also held territorial claims on her development as a radical and writer. Her geographic identity, which moves in a trajectory from west coast to east coast, calls into question any connection the poet might have to a fixed locus, preventing her from becoming a writer of one place—a New York poet, or, as Edmund Wilson, writing in the late twenties, once referred to her, "a Poet of the Pacific." Vermont, for example, represents several distinct categories of "place" for Taggard. It is an ancestral place, a part-time residence—a place, she maintains, to know as a "tourist"—and a site of her own continued radicalization.

Taggard was born in Waitsburg, Washington in 1894. Her Puritan ancestors had gradually moved westward from Vermont, to Missouri, to Washington state. (After a scholarship allowed her to study at the University of California, Taggard migrated to New York's Greenwich Village where she moved easily inside its socialist

and bohemian circles). When she was two years old her parents, who were evangelical "Disciples of Christ," took the family to Hawaii where they opened a missionary school: "[t]here they met much that was unfamiliar and there they stayed" (xiii). Taggard's descriptions of her parent's impulsiveness and her seemingly unconventional Hawaiian childhood appears in the memoir "Hawaii, Washington, Vermont," first published in Scribner's Magazine in 1934, and then, in a revised form, as a preface to Calling Western Union. In addition to detailing the economic deprivation of her youth, the memoir is an early tribute to multiculturalism--though complicated by her parent's role as "civilizers." Her fond reminiscence of Hawaii, evoking the child's perspicacity, explores racial and cultural difference and its effects upon her developing radical consciousness. From her evangelical and Puritan roots Taggard refigures Hawaii as "[o]ur garden of Eden; our newfound-land." Her *saviors* become the "Portuguese, the Filipinos, the Puerto Ricans, the Japanese, the Chinese, the Hawaiian-Chinese, and the hap-a-haoles" (xv). More importantly she identifies herself as an islander, "as brown as natives and as happy-go-lucky," with her speech "full of Hawaiian expressions."²²

22

Though Taggard was, as a child, aware of the plantation system developing around her in Hawaii, she has only one small reference to it in this particular memoir. Yet in an article she wrote for the Yale Review shortly after the end of World War II, she attempts to link the islands, most recently associated with the Pearl Harbor bombing, to their early days as an American colony. In the following description Taggard reacts to the system that has controlled and classified the island's multicultural work force: "The big 'heathen' (here she appropriates WASP terminology) worked in the sugar-cane fields and in the mill. The little heathen came to school...At the mill the white men who worked the heathen wore boots and carried whips and clubs in their belts. The Japanese and Chinese coolies were docile; they worked long hours, sent their children to learn English, put our kind of clothing on them, encouraged them to

The memoir is also an essential situating device for Taggard's concerns as an American radical writer and political activist in the 1930s. Her early witnessing of colonial practice in Hawaii, as well as the social othering she experienced on her return to the mainland United States, enabled her to identify with, and skillfully interpret, the depth of suffering caused by racism at home, European fascism, the Depression, and the Civil War in Spain. The dust bowl, a familiar Depression era symbol, appears with comparative familiarity in Taggard's reminiscences of eastern Washington state, where her family returned for several years because of her father's failing health: "Dust, ankle-deep, paved the main street"(xvi). "Dust storms blew over the wheat hills" (xvii). As Hawaii represented all that was natural abundance available to even poor island dwellers, eastern Washington state represented only lack, mostly as a result of small-town prejudice and individual repression. "Outside there was stubble or dust, no grass. Children must not play in the orchards. If little girls were bored they could hem dish towels or swat flies" (xvi).... "There were no ice cream cones, no cold lemon-ade, and no soda pop"(xviii).²³

mind their teachers. The races of children did not fight among themselves; they were affectionate and pliable. Silence and timidity were the only obstacles the teachers ever encountered. Now and then, a mother or a father said, "Sayo Nara, " or "Hello," to the teachers. Who could complain of the heathen" (53)?

23

The theatre of repression Taggard evokes through these negative passages is further explored when she equates the provincial mores derided in the works of Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, and Edgar Lee Masters with her own impressions of provincial Washington state:

The broken finger nails on the stubby hands of those people! The envy and scorn for all trades that differed from their kind of toil; the disgust for all other skills; the malignant hatred of all desire that did

Taggard ends the memoir (as it was originally published in 1934) in Vermont where she owns a farm, where she has taught, and where "some of [her] people were buried more than a hundred years ago" (xxx). She expresses a fondness for Vermont, which reflects an attitude of detached interest. Though the poet has become "rooted" to Vermont through familial connections and through a desire for the beauty of its natural landscape, both connections engender, for Taggard, a falseness, when she begins to understand the state in terms of class relations. In her decision to resituate the memoir "Hawaii, Washington, Vermont," as a prefatory frame for Calling Western Union, she revises her conclusion. She attempts to distance herself from her earlier experiences seeing Vermont only through the eyes of "the summer visitor," the metropolitan intellectual who sees selectively, seeking out a space in which to rest and relax. In 1936, at the height of the Depression, what Taggard begins to understand is the actual, material and physical, "everyday" Vermont:

I saw canned wood-chuck in the farmers' cellars. I saw slums in Brattleboro and Burlington. I knew children who picked ferns for a few cents a day. I knew a man who worked in a furniture factory for ten cents an hour! I saw his starved wife and children...I saw five men who were sentenced to jail for their activity in the Vermont Marble Strike. I saw a voucher for two cents one worker got for a

not have money for its object! Was it for this that the intrepid crossed the plains and the Rockies? To make this life! What a sorry life! Based on mass panic and fear of a whole complex of things in a civilized world. Foreigners, first and foremost; Chinks, Wops, Polacks, Swedes, Huns, Frogs--ridicule at one end, lynching at the other. City people, smart folks, gentle folks, stuck-up people--freeze 'em out. Book learning, scientific ideas, the higher criticism--down with it, it's immoral. Innocent pleasures, beauty, joy of life, wine, pictures, music. So you're getting too good for us plain folks, are you (xxxvi)!

week's wages, all that was left after the company deducted for rent and light...When they eat, the quarry workers eat potatoes and turnips. . . . In Rutland County the Overseer of the Poor is a Marble Company official (xxxii).

Taggard rewrites "Vermont" from ancestral burial ground and weekend getaway to a site of working-class struggle and solidarity, using her own awakening to prepare readers for the militant lyrics of Calling Western Union. Many of the poems, written in response to the strike, and the general state of Depression America, complicate the pastoral, ancestral Vermont -- vacationland of America. If she can learn to see the worker's struggle there and the horrors of rural poverty, so may the reader.

Yet before Taggard admits that she was "wrong about Vermont," she recalls a preoccupation of the 1920's modernist writer with the search for community, and recalls that what led her back to Vermont was a sense of communal desire. While in the 1930s much of this communal desire was taken up through involvement in the Communist movement: organizations like the League of American Writers and its Writer's School in New York, the Teacher's Union, as well as Communist affiliated publications like The New Masses, earlier she had found her community in New York and Connecticut, where she lived after she was "married."²⁴ Yet Taggard writes of her Connecticut community with irritation rather than admiration:

²⁴

Taggard's first husband was Robert Wolf, a novelist and radical like herself, whom she married in 1921. That same year her only child, Marcia, was born. Her marriage ended in 1931 when Wolf was institutionalized. In 1935 Taggard married journalist Kenneth Durant. Durant, who had been a Harvard classmate of John Reed's, headed the New York office of the Soviet News Agency TASS, which he had opened in the mid-twenties.

I saw...a writer or two who cheated our neighbors and wrote them up as country bumpkins. I knew when that happened that I did not agree with my group of fellow-writers that it was all right to outwit and exploit farmers who shared with them. But this was the doctrine of writers returned from Paris in **the dark ages, the 1920s** (xxx). (bold mine).

This mention of the 1920s as "the dark ages," and the confession of her developing alienation from "fellow writers," is important to understanding Taggard's embrace of the idea of political subjectivity as she rearticulates her literary desires to the tune of thirties' proletarian culture. She describes twenties culture as enforcing an elitist, individualist practice. Though Taggard was a politically committed leftist in the 1920s, her negative reading of the decade, constructed as "liberating" especially for women, is exemplified in rearticulations of work she produced during this time. "Life of the Mind, 1934" and "Everyday Alchemy" are two such poems she disengages from their entanglement with "the dark ages" of the 1920s and its literary discourses. "Life of the Mind" evokes similarity in title to a biography of Emily Dickinson that Taggard worked on through much of the twenties, and "Everyday Alchemy," originally written in 1922, represents Taggard's emphasis on the love lyric as well as her interest in the metaphysical poetry tradition. Their appearance in Calling Western Union situates both poems within the discourse of literary radicalism, placing them and their author in dialogue with a changing readership inside a significantly altering social world.

"Life of the Mind, 1934," though not a poem about Emily Dickinson, tacitly reminds readers of Taggard's biography of the poet, The Life and Mind of Emily

Dickinson, published in 1930, and reprinted in 1934.²⁵ The biography's title reflects Taggard's interest in giving "mind" to woman; in fact she wrote an "intellectual" biography of Dickinson, exploring how the dimensions of this nineteenth century poet's idiosyncratic brand of verse reflected her peculiarly isolated existence.²⁶ Moreover, (whether or not she was directly cognizant of the close phrasing of "life and mind" with "life of the mind"), Taggard's "life of the mind" meant one thing in the twenties, while she worked in solitary on the very solitary literary figure, Emily Dickinson; "life of the mind," by 1934, became a call to action.²⁷ In "Life of the

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The biography was received more or less positively by critics, who focused upon the speculative and "mannered" style of the text. In terms of the book as "speculative," Taggard anticipates post-modern practice by embellishing and reading into much of her character descriptions. Taggard's "projecting" a self, and indeed a romantic self, onto an individual about whose life so little is known, anticipates the interruptions of recent theories of biography and autobiography, which challenge the notion that the genre produces objective, accurate "lives," rather than creates additional fictions. Note the following description of Dickinson's relationship with her family: "When it came out in speech, her family found her wit a little too witty; father would silently leave the table when Emily's talk escaped bounds -- his displeasure numbed her manner, but could not change its flavour" (11).

²⁶ Nancy Walker, in an essay on Dickinson, Alice James, and Virginia Woolf, remarking on Dickinson's life of "extreme privacy" (272) describes the poet as having lived "the life of the mind," yet she makes no reference to Taggard's articulation of that very thesis nearly sixty years earlier. (The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings. Ed. Shari Benstock. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1988). Suzanne Juhasz's study of Emily Dickinson's "life of the mind," The Undiscovered Continent. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1983), begins by tracing the genesis of Dickinson scholarship. "[That Dickinson] lived primarily in the mind...has long been acknowledged as a factor central to her biography and to her art" (1-2). One can't blame either Walker or Juhasz for their oversight, when the work of Genevieve Taggard both as poet and feminist intellectual has all but disappeared from cultural and historical memory.

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It is worth noting that Taggard begins her biography with a description of the scene of Dickinson's one great "public" act. She picks up her pen, writes and posts four

Mind, 1934" Taggard again merges poetic line with protest line, expressing the "will to endow"... "word-in-deed." The poem equates hunger with battle: "Necessity to eat, \ Necessity to act." as well as equating writing with that very same battle. "And act aright renews \ The mind's link with the arm." The poem's ultimate message is to align writing itself with struggle, "Now action like a sword. \ Now to redeem the word." Finally, the linguistic by-product of that battle must serve a particular end, as expressed in the poem's epigraph: "The words in the books are not true \ If they never act in you."²⁸

"Everyday Alchemy" appeared in Genevieve Taggard's first collection of poems, For Eager Lovers (1922). The poem is important because it complicates Taggard's interests in the private body, inscribed as that which valorizes the private relationships of individuals over the social body in which they as civil subjects reside:

Men go to women mutely for their peace;
And they, who lack it most, create it when
They make, because they must, loving their men,
A solace for sad bosom-bended heads. There
Is all the meagre peace men get--no otherwhere;
No mountain space, no tree with placid leaves,

poems to Thomas Higginson. Taggard pointedly wonders whether the commencement of the Civil War could have had something to do with Dickinson's call to action:

Let us use the usual language regarding Emily Dickinson: she was an eccentric, a recluse, an old maid, one of the many in New England. She had been living in an enclosed universe and now found the new styles of living and dying troublesome and disorderly. . . . As would be said of any such person, the war gave her something to think about" (6).

²⁸ Also see Paula Rabinowitz's reading of the poem in Labor & Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America (U of North Carolina P, 1991), 42.

Or heavy gloom beneath a young girl's hair,
 No sound of valley bell on autumn air
 Or room made home with doves along the eaves,
 Ever holds peace, like this, poured by poor women
 Out of their heart's poverty, for worn men.

In form "Everyday Alchemy" is a truncated sonnet. It revises the love sonnet and reverses the relationship of strong man / weak woman. Rhythmically the poem holds a kind of simplicity; the repetition of the word "peace" suggests an overriding calm within the negative space constructed by the words and phrases (though used as tropes of comparison) connoting lack: "No mountain," "no tree with placid leaves," no sonorous "valley bell on autumn air." Thematically the poem makes social commentary about poverty, while it presents women as work-worn through their roles as nurturers to men. It also treats symbolically working class women and men who possess nothing but each other. In fact it complicates the sonnet as a form traditionally associated with "love." "Everyday Alchemy," when originally published in 1922, might have been read as a gesture toward the "love lyric" tradition of Edna St. Vincent Millay, Elinor Wylie and Sara Teasdale.²⁹ Yet Millay's and Teasdale's lyrics evoked the poet as lover, as one generally oblivious to the social landscape in which the love is either lamented or celebrated. Taggard explores the private couple (or couples) as a distinct social unit; the poverty surrounding working class women and men who can seek only each other would seem awkward in Millay's complaint, "I

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For a reading of Taggard's work within the love lyric tradition of the "new woman," see Nina Miller's unpublished dissertation Love Poetry and the New Woman: Literary Negotiations in Edna St. Vincent Millay, Genevieve Taggard and Dorothy Parker, Northwestern University, 1991.

let my candle burn at both ends," or Teasdale's question, "Why am I crying after love?" Taggard creates through these women and men a place to demystify the magic of love, made metaphor by the poem's title -- the medieval practice of alchemy -- making gold out of "dross" -- wedded to the reality of material deprivation. Those who are without means possess something other than "magic," Taggard informs us; they possess a poverty that when shared becomes more tolerable.

In terms of the history of American poetry, "Everyday Alchemy" is a major refiguration of the metaphysical tradition and Taggard, like other significant modern poets, had begun to embrace in the 1920s. The publication of T.S. Eliot's essay "The Metaphysical Poets," in 1921, helped rekindle an interest among modern poets in this sixteenth century literary tradition.³⁰ One may certainly read "Everyday Alchemy" with John Donne's "Love's Alchemie," in which the poet muses on the "hidden mysterie[s]" of love. Importantly the "sexual chemistry" implied in Donne's poem is translated by Taggard into a kind of alchemical nurturing, the mothering of world-weary, destitute men. Taggard's own interest in these poets resulted in her editing an anthology, Circumferences: Varieties of Metaphysical Verse, which she published also

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In the essay Eliot praises Donne and the other Metaphysical poets for their ability to synthesize dissimilar aspects of experience, and their artistry in fusing thought and feeling. It is also in this essay that Eliot coins his famous term "dissociation of sensibility," referring to separation of the emotion and the intellect as practiced by poets between the last part of the seventeenth century up until the early twentieth. Eliot, and other modern poets, pointed particularly to Victorian poets such as Tennyson and Browning as exemplars of this dissociated practice. However, Taggard includes Browning in her book on "varieties of Metaphysical verse," claiming that he writes an "approximate" of what she considers to be a "pure metaphysical poem." (She maintains the same about Blake and Wordsworth) (9).

in 1930. In Circumferences, Taggard traces the tradition from the metaphysical poets themselves up until the present time of the text's publication, "with John Donne and Emily Dickinson constrained into a curious marriage at its center" (Ridge 11).³¹ Taggard's "varieties of Metaphysical verse" are just that, types or as she refers to them "approximates" of the tradition that began with Donne and whose influence could be felt into her own generation of poets. Although Taggard's own work does not appear in this anthology, as a poet she identified with the metaphysical tradition. However, the exigencies of Calling Western Union indicates the poet's feeling that the social crisis of America in the Depression required a different kind of verse altogether.

Yet Taggard does more than remap her own concerns about poetic traditions with "Everyday Alchemy." Her interest in lifting the poem from its association with the alienated concerns of the twenties' poetic zeitgeist, in addition to addressing the poem's possibilities for engendering social dialogue in a time of crisis, was made manifest when she republished it in Calling Western Union. With this act of positioning, she asked her audience to re-read the poem as a text of the Depression, thus refiguring the impoverished, working class couples created in more prosperous, if

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Lola Ridge reviewed the book for the New York Evening Post (5 Apr. 1930) to which she occasionally contributed. Though the review was quite favorable, Ridge had written to her close friend, the novelist and poet, Evelyn Scott, that she was disappointed that neither of their work had appeared in the anthology. Taggard's "canon" of metaphysical poets include Dunbar, Raleigh, Sydney, Shakespeare, Donne, Jonson, Herrick, Herbert, Milton, Marvell, Vaughan, Dryden, Pope, Blake, Burns, Wordsworth, Shelley, Browning, Dickinson, Wylie, Leonie Adams, Bogan (three of her Greenwich Village "girlfriends"), Cummings, Eliot, Frost, Millay, Pound, Sandburg, Stevens, etc.

more alienated, times. The bodies described in this poem are essential defining symbols and Taggard sets up an important ambiguity by rearticulating the physical roles of these bodies. Though the bodies she describes in "Everyday Alchemy" are silenced by poverty, Taggard shows the male bodies as more vulnerable--mute and bent. They provide nothing, but seek. The female bodies are active, (of course because of "love") making a "solace" for the male bodies as they seek "peace." Taggard informs us that nothing in the natural world can provide the solace that women provide; their hearts, which in more prosperous times would reflect love as an idealization, now "pour out" only poverty, to men who, far from being ideal lovers themselves, are "worn." Whether or not intentional, through its resituation the poem challenges Michael Gold's male-defined tropes of Proleterian Realism. Taggard represents the male workers' bodies through weakness, as she describes the female bodies in strength: (the workers' long-suffering wives).³² The poem also permits the reading of other tropes, non-sexual unions, nurses \ patients as in war-time, or mothers and sons. Whether or not Taggard had it in mind, the poem's evocation of women, men and war cannot be overlooked, especially if we are to read the poem in

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The feminist concerns of "Everyday Alchemy" are at best problematic. An important trope for leftist and feminist writers of the thirties was the woman who offered comfort as she struggled to resist oppression and worked to build a new world alongside her man. Taggard, reviewing Alexandra Kollontay's novel Red Love in the late twenties in The New Masses, attempts to problematize the nurturing as well as social roles of women and men: "I believe in endowment of motherhood, taxation of men by the state, and babies born any nine months their mothers desire. But Kollontay is a little hipped (sic) as all feminists are, in thinking that what we want is woman's freedom from men, rather than freedom with them. Men need endowment of motherhood as much as women and children do; the need is a social one, not a sex affair all alone in a vacuum" (29).

its social context and as an answer to the erotics of Donne's "Loves Alchemie." With the line "men go to women mutely for their peace," Taggard evokes the image of a *pieta* or a woman holding a wounded or dying soldier to her breast as in war memorials and anti-war posters.³³ "Everyday Alchemy" not only reflects but concretizes poverty as it becomes a public spectacle in the 1930s. Finally, by refiguring the poem from its association with the metaphysical tradition and its interest in metaphor and lyric, Taggard complicates the relationship of poetic form in general. Placing "Everyday Alchemy" alongside the activist lyrics of Calling Western Union, then places it in dialogue with the "formulaism" of proletarian writing. These acts are a great challenge to U.S. poetic culture, left and right.

Taggard's resituation of "Everyday Alchemy" into the proletarian collection Calling Western Union, her efforts to put Emily Dickinson into the canon of American Literature,³⁴ as well as her rehistoricizing the poetic tradition of John Donne, show how firmly grounded she was as a "public intellectual." In fact I argue that Taggard's appearance in one of the seminal works of post-war radical literary history, Daniel Aaron's Writers on the Left: Episodes in Literary Communism, helps maintain her significant, albeit forgotten, role as a "left" public intellectual. Both Paula Rabinowitz and Alan Wald have pointed to the exceptionally "even-keeled"

³³ It is even possible that Taggard knew Kathe Kollwitz's drawings of mothers holding their sons' slain corpses. Kollwitz lost a son in World War I and a grandson in World War II. Both were named Peter.

³⁴ My mother tells me that in her poetry classes at the University of Michigan, where she was an English major in the late forties, she read neither Emily Dickinson nor Genevieve Taggard.

discussions of the literary left that Daniel Aaron created in this important text, which also helped define a place for radical literary history. Quite remarkably the book first appeared in the early sixties at the height of the Cold War.³⁵ As Rabinowitz and Constance Coiner have noted, attention to the literary left has largely focused on male writers; Aaron's text is of course no exception. Yet, considering that Genevieve Taggard is one of the literary disappeared, her presence in Aaron's book, particularly her presence as a participant in "public" left intellectual debates, suggests the importance and even the "tokenness" (after all she is one of the 'few' women represented therein) of her work on the left.

In a chapter dedicated to Communist writer and critic Mike Gold, and The New Masses as an important left venue in the late twenties, through the Depression, and on into the forties, Aaron focuses upon a dialogue in its pages, "Are Artists People?" (January 1927) in which Genevieve Taggard participated. Her comments in the New Masses of the late twenties, as fitting as they are with the tenor of the times, as it were, offer significant insight into ideological changes that would occur among left intellectuals during the Great Depression. Taggard's interest in the proletarianization of culture, which is evident in certain poems in Calling Western

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Rabinowitz's discussion of Aaron and Walter Rideout's The Radical Novel in the United States, 1900-1950 is in Labor and Desire. See Wald's new introduction to the Morningside edition of Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism. New York: Columbia UP, 1992. Perhaps one of Aaron's most valuable points, especially with regard to my project is this remark from his preface: "Without including the fellow travelers or liberals or non-party radicals the story of literary communism would be very thin indeed, for the Communist Party had far less influence on writers than the idea of communism or the image of Soviet Russia" (ix).

Union, is hardly discernable in these earlier discussions. Fourteen writers responded to a variety of questions about their relationship to art and society. One of the questions, which, although not immediately addressed, had indirect gender consequences for "modern" women like Taggard and their roles both inside and outside the domestic sphere.³⁶ Whether the "advent of the machine meant the death of art and culture" or "the birth of a new culture?" inspired Taggard to readdress the question in a separate essay "The Ruskinian Boys See Red" in the July issue.³⁷ Focusing on "Are Artists People?" Aaron maintains that various responses were given in support of the machine age, and none of the artists agreed with Mike Gold "that a person was likely to become a better artist by accepting the Machine age and the

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For technological questions concerning women in the 1920s see Elaine Showalter's introduction to These Modern Women: Autobiographical Essays from the Twenties. (New York: the Feminist Press, 1979, 1989), and Ruth Schwartz Cowan's More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave. (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

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The other questions that the fourteen authors responded to were: "...why they wrote and for what audience; their definition of literary prostitution; their opinion of American culture; the feasibility of writers united to secure artistic and economic advancement; whether society had the right to make social demands on the writer; and what attitude, if any, the writer should take toward the revolutionary labor movement" (165). Taggard's essay was a rather negative review of the Machine Age Exposition, organized by Jean Heap, and held on May 16-18 1927 in New York. ("After the show we went outside to a comparatively better show, the city of New York..." New Masses 18). She drew criticism from Lewis Mumford in a later issue for not being appropriately critical of the technological age and its crowded subways and massive skyscrapers. However, Taggard's response to Mumford, in which she disclaimed any opinion that the machine age was "good or perfect," suggests that his fear of "congestion," which technological development encouraged, was not all that different from Taggard's essential dislikes. Taggard was, nonetheless, better humored in her criticisms (418, n.12).

proletarian cause" (166). Taggard seemed particularly piqued by Gold's adamancy. She did not want to see the writer accepting "proletarian stocks and bonds, glories and goodies." Interestingly, the class lines she urges middle class women like herself to cross during the Great Depression are kept separate in this particular dialogue: "The New Masses is making a great mistake if it tries to convert bourgeois artists into proletarian ones." She preferred to see it help the artist "take hold of the spectacle of modern life by printing the work of those who have begun to make inroads upon it" (166). Except for a brief mention of her participation in the Communist oriented League of American Writers, Aaron does not look at Taggard's Depression era militancy and thus never gives an accurate description of the changes in her political outlook. He does, however, suggest her difference from the "liberal" writers who shared the intellectual dialogue with her. He suggests that while remaining fiercely independent from any party programs, radical intellectuals like Taggard began to register "self-contempt" (168). "If I were in charge of a revolution," she writes,

I'd get rid of every single artist immediately; and trust to luck that the fecundity of the earth would produce another crop when I had got some of the hard work done. Being an artist, I have the sense that a small child has when its mother is in the middle of house-work. I don't intend to get in the way, and I hope that there'll be an unmolested spot for me when things have quieted down (168).³⁸

While the above comment paves the way for Taggard's more militant Depression era

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The feminine analogies used in this comment are rather interesting. Artists are associated with "fecundity" and "crop[s]." They are also represented as children who know better than to interfere with "mother" and her "house-work." The fact that Taggard was at this time juggling being an artist, a mother to a six year old, and a "public intellectual" is an appropriate connection to such analogies.

stance, as I have maintained, her public activity from her accomplishments as an editor and biographer to her participation in the significant left dialogues of the period in The New Masses, to her work on behalf of striking marble workers in Vermont, and her executive position in the League of American Writers, not only created Taggard's role as "public intellectual," but suggests how deeply entwined is this performance with her life as a creative artist.

IV. In 1942, Genevieve Taggard published her penultimate book of poetry, Long View. Like Calling Western Union, it contained poems of social urgency. Yet Taggard had also begun an interest in writing for music, and in undertaking this interest in musical forms, explored the social and public relevance of both poetry and song. At the end of Long View Taggard provides a brief essay "Notes on Writing Words for Music," in which she briefly outlines her musical roots and how she "learned" to write for music.³⁹ In the piece, Taggard provides a list of suggestions for readers interested in putting words to musical settings. These suggestions still bear the

³⁹ Taggard claims that her interest in writing for music has been influenced by a disparate but largely popular tradition:

My own experience, my learning process acknowledges Robert Burns and the Negroes, who have made up words for Spirituals and Blues, many of them nameless people. Leadbelly is a clear case of a person who knows [how to write for music] and does. Blitzstein. Gershwin. Shakespeare. Woodie Guthrie. Earl Robinson. Cole Porter. Certain hymn writers. The writers of songs you hear in the middle of the night on the air. This is my song book. You see I cannot learn from the "good poets" of the 19th century or the 20th. The only exception is James Joyce with his tenor voice and his Chamber Music.

marks of the mid-Depression convictions of Calling Western Union: "Song in collective. (Poetry should be)." Shortly before she published Long View she had read Illusion and Reality by the left-wing British critic and poet Christopher Caudwell.⁴⁰ Caudwell's book on Marxist poetics explores both poetry's historical and anthropological importance in which he locates the genre's initial inception as a collective rhythmic language (like song). Like Taggard, Caudwell was interested in the intimate connection between poetry and economic life as the poems I discussed in Calling Western Union suggest. As Caudwell writes in a chapter entitled "The Developments of Modern Poetry," "Modern poetry is capitalist poetry...It is impossible to understand modern poetry unless we understand it historically—in motion" (55). His characterization of poetry as the "organic product of a whole society violently in motion," recalls Taggard's poems of marching women, not to mention those of the alternately striking and starving workers. Taggard leaves off her discussion on writing for music with a long quote from Illusion and Reality. Ignoring Caudwell's reductive, though suitably of its moment, exploration of the varieties of bourgeois poetry and the need for transformation, she focuses on his attention to poetry's "primitive" roots in collectivity. For Taggard, and Taggard's Caudwell,

⁴⁰ Caudwell, whose real name was Christopher St. John Sprague, died on the front in Spain in 1937, fighting for the loyalist cause. His major works, all published posthumously for he died at the tender age of 29, include Studies in a Dying Culture, The Crisis in Physics, Further Studies in a Dying Culture, which E.P. Thompson contends to be his masterpiece, and Illusion and Reality, a work of poetry criticism, which Taggard had read and attempted to promote within her leftist writer's circle. He also wrote detective novels, a "serious" novel, poetry and a series of aeronautics textbooks; in fact he supported himself largely from the work he did for an aeronautics publisher.

poetry is an art form whose "truth" is represented through not only its dynamic social role, but "its content of collective emotion" (Long View 113).

Taggard perhaps best realizes her Caudwellian articulation of "collective emotion" in a series of poems included in Long View that she wrote "To the Negro People."⁴¹ Through these particular poems Taggard reads African-American cultural tropes such as music, as examples of struggles for "truth" and social justice. Her social vision, along with her interest in the collectivity of song, presents blacks as cultural innovators and social agents, albeit whose voices have been denied and whose "collective" contributions have been buried. Three of the four poems of the series, "Spirituals," "City of the Blues," and "Proud Day," composed in 1939, speak distinctly of African-American voice, acknowledging both its influence as well as its

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In the fall of 1942 Ralph Ellison wrote to Taggard about his interest in writing an essay on Caudwell. He was then editor of the short lived Negro Quarterly, which published Taggard's "race" poem "Star Rising," which remained uncollected at her death. I reprint the poem here:

The delegate in India looks at a star.
He is voting. The congress is noisy as a sea.
The Aztec looks at a star, refuses speech, Inwardly he shouts.
A man in Brazil sees the same star on the same night.

The Persian, the African Negro know
How it haunts the horizon and why
Near in the sky it wears the red of Mars.
The Negro in Alabama, driving a truck
Past the sharecropper huts takes the shine in.
He looks over his shoulder, sees
How it seems to be moving along with him as he moves ...
Gone now, and then comes back with double blaze. The star
Enters the skull of those who sit in prisons
Drawing the dark peoples upward, the star rises.
Drawing the dark peoples upward, the star rises (254).

mistreatment and its neglect. Taggard had great difficulty publishing these poems. On one occasion she sent three to Richard Wright, whom she knew from The League of American Writers,⁴² asking if he could recommend a place for her to send them. She had in mind black publications and requested no pay "if they appear in a magazine or newspaper read by people who will value them."⁴³ Thanks to Wright's effort, two poems, "Spirituals" and "Proud Day" appeared in the October 1940 issue of The Crisis.

In "Spirituals" Taggard reminds us of the unsung poet(s) of the South whose "bones \ Sleep in the dust of song." She constructs the poem as part spiritual itself, "My way's cloudy, I cry out, \ Cloudy Lord." It is also a quest to retrieve the buried past of the African American spiritual tradition. She suggests that the entire South is a "burying ground" for this neglected art. If "Spirituals" laments a collective past, a musical and aesthetic practice whose cultural importance has been overlooked, then perhaps Taggard is also making a self-comparison. Just as the poetry she wrote, not to mention much of the writing of radicals of her generation, has been marginalized

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Taggard, who was an elected member of the League's Executive Council, was also active in its New York Chapter. In fact she used one of its local forums to discuss her interest in black literary aesthetics. In the fall of 1938 along with Sterling Brown, Jessie Fauset and Langston Hughes, Taggard spoke on the topic, "The Negro, A Force in American Literature."

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In the same letter Taggard remarked that three of the four poems from this series had been "turned down by nearly every magazine I publish in. Perhaps there is a good reason, but I think not;...they are among my best. Several editors offered to print one of the three, but not all three, and not in the title." (Letter in the Richard Wright Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University).

and neglected, the classical focus of a Eurocentric American musical canon has ignored the musical contributions of the black south. Importantly, most literary history written under the influence of the New Criticism disregarded Genevieve Taggard's contributions to American poetry in the twentieth century; it has buried her along with the popular traditions of working class poetry and the African American lyric tradition. Interestingly, if we consider contemporary literary discourse with its indebtedness to post-structuralism and Cultural Studies--specifically "popular" cultural studies, Taggard's interest in black popular arts needs to be reassessed.

Yet in representing African American cultural tropes against the mainstream canon, even the popular tradition can be subverted. Taggard's poem "Proud Day" conflates both popular and "high" traditions as it celebrates a black artist whose work and persona embraced both aesthetic spheres. "Proud Day" is an especially moving tribute to Marian Anderson. Anderson, the black contralto who, denied a voice, in both the literal and figurative senses of the word, in Jim Crow America, became the toast of Europe, where she performed to sold-out audiences. Taggard's poem, constructed like a gospel hymn, celebrates Anderson's famous 1939 performance on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.⁴⁴

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Marian Anderson returned to the United States from Europe in 1935 an international star, and sang her spiritual and classical repertoire to a sold-out crowd at New York's Town Hall. In the following year impresario Sol Hurock tried to secure a performance for Anderson at Washington, DC's Constitution Hall, which had been founded by the Daughters of the American Revolution. However, there was a clause in the hall's contracts stating that no blacks could perform there. When Eleanor Roosevelt learned of this blatant act of discrimination, she resigned from the D.A.R. Finally Hurock, with a little help from his friends, was able to secure the Lincoln Memorial.

Our sister sang on the Lincoln steps. Proud day.
 We came to hear our sister sing. Proud day.
 Voice out of depths, poise with memory,
 What goodness, what splendor lay long under foot!
 Our sister with a lasso of sorrow and triumph
 Caught America, made it listen. Proud day.
 The peaceful Lincoln sat so still. Proud day.
 Waiting the Republic to be born again. Proud day.
 Never, never forget how the dark people rewarded us
 Giving out of their want and their little freedom
 This blazing star. This blazing star.
 Something spoke in my patriot heart. Proud day.

The voice of this poem appears intentionally ambiguous. A black audience is represented as mesmerized with awe and pride as they experience Anderson's moving performance; yet there is also the white audience — the poet, and other progressive whites who support black artists and engage in anti-racist activities. Yet the demarcation between black audience, black performer, white poet and white audience is blurred. In fact the poet historicizes the conflict surrounding Anderson's appearance in Washington by deliberately integrating the audience within the poem. "Our sister," whom Taggard addresses in the opening lines, suggests her making a gift of the poem to be engaged by a black audience she hoped would value it, as she confessed to Richard Wright when she sent him the poem. Yet if it is the black audience that speaks proudly of the performance, there is also the gratitude and memory of the white audience suggested by the lines, "never forget how the dark people rewarded us." It is "their want" and "their little freedom" that has produced and given this *gift*. Taggard's emphasis is heroic; she juxtaposes the great black singer as she performs "Ave Maria" and "My Country Tis of Thee" with the stone face of Abraham Lincoln looking on. Though Lincoln was responsible for granting

(limited) suffrage to black men, and allowing "the Republic to be born again," Taggard wants readers to acknowledge the neglect and burial of African-American voice as she symbolically renders it through Anderson's performance: "Voice out of depth, poise with memory, \ What goodness, what splendor lay long under foot!" That racism and legislative injustice have denied blacks creative integrity, as well as denied whites the possibility of ever knowing it, is the underlying theme of this poem's celebration. Her construction of the poem, to suggest the Spiritual musical genre refigured by African-Americans in the ante-bellum south, shows Anderson's role as interpreter and keeper of tradition as well as re-interpreter of the European canon of Schubert and Mahler.⁴⁵ Taggard repeats the phrase "Proud day," like a gospel refrain, in six end lines of this twelve line poem. Her final line shifts the attention from "our sister," spoken at the beginning of the poem, to "[s]omething spoke in my patriot heart." She hence reinforces the ambiguity of voice, punctuating this final line with a final "Proud day." We are left with the powerful image of Anderson and her diverse audience, standing in front of the symbolic Lincoln, and rearticulating for writers like Taggard what it means to be a "patriot."

Taggard wrote to Langston Hughes sometime in 1939, also sending him poems

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A recent PBS documentary on Anderson provides an ironic anecdote paralleling Jim Crow America and the Nazi regime whom American soldiers (including blacks) were off fighting. Anderson's German refugee accompanist Franz Rupp recalls the Anderson entourage going to the train station after a performance in Birmingham, Alabama (to a segregated audience no doubt). German prisoners of war, who were in transit to internment at a nearby army base, were given first-class meals in the whites-only waiting room, while Anderson, a world-class diva, ate a sandwich on a bench in the rear outside the station.

from the "Negro" series. She had admired Hughes' work since the twenties when she solicited poems from him for The Measure, a journal she had co-founded and edited. In the letter she explained, "I am writing a series, entitled To the Negro People of which these are a part. City of the Blues, one I like the best has been turned down by every magazine I know."⁴⁶ Taggard also engages the collectivity of song in "City of the Blues." But rather than representations of pride and dignity as in "Proud Day," this poem offers lamentations, following another rich African-American innovation, blues music. Whereas "Proud Day" describes a musical tribute in the heroic sense, "City of the Blues" pays its tribute in the discordant strains of a "river whistle tuned harsh." Taggard's St. Louis, often romanticized through its rich musical traditions, is rearticulated from the vantage point of the Depression era black worker, unemployed "In the chicken yard, listlessly, beside the piles, waiting for \ nothing." The heteroglossic landscape that Taggard creates of St. Louis, that city on the river, with its "river side, piles rotted with river," expresses the ugly desolation familiar to Taggard's 1930's audience. Yet her staccato placement of words suggests several competing scenarios for her representations of a ravaged, Depression era St. Louis. What in places suggests a slaughterhouse "With droppings and moulted feathers[,] [f]ence, coop, mash-\pans, wire," also reads as `home,' a shanty-town of "slums and slime" with "frame houses. Dark, wet, cold." There is also a teasing possibility of industry, "[t]ug going by, puffpuff," about to proceed to the "St. Louis dock \

⁴⁶ Letter in the Langston Hughes Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

[s]tacked high" where there is "[c]oal smoke, winches, shovels,—crash of freight." But it is a distant music, which expresses itself through the "Y'hoo's" of trains and boats. And juxtaposed against this industrial movement is the black body that gets to comprehend "silence," the silence that "[b]lows clean through your bones." Whatever is fiercest about St. Louis' riverbeds as they symbolize Depression poverty, Taggard reinforces the misery variously visited upon African-Americans: Those who know the place know that "(When they kill, they kill \ Here, and dump the body here.)" The ambiguity of these parenthetical lines evokes more than the mundane suggestion of a slaughtered animal's carcas. It intimates both the criminal nature of social and economic deprivation as well as a community continually victimized by the ubiquitous lynch mob. Thus Taggard steeps her poem with bleak images of filth, stench, lethargy and decay to comment upon 'blues' as a social condition born of these metaphors of lack and to blues as a musical cultural formation that can only develop out of such despair. The blues then metaphorizes the literal rottenness of place, both social and economic; if the Depression aggravated the already unjust working and living conditions of African-Americans, the cultural expressions they explored at this particular time were not only accurate responses, but necessary tropes with which to resist them. Rather than directly exploring "blues" as an art-form, "City of the Blues" is a suggestion of how "blues" must continually be created: "The Negro boy, head bent, beating out his tattoo \ Nimble and complex, on the fence..." These lines follow with Taggard's necessary reminder that despair too begets creativity (something the radical poets of the 1930s knew all too well). She follows up with:

Get ready to blow, trumpets, trumpets, trumpets,
 O Gabriel, O Willie Smith⁴⁷
 Take it away.

The last poem in the series, "Chant for the Negro Poet of America Not Yet Born," (1941) informs us that a rich anonymous past will produce a talent "[b]orn, awake, with the urgent rising of his people," an unprecedented new talent in a future world finally ready for him.⁴⁸ Like "Spirituals," "Chant for the Great Negro Poet of America Not Yet Born," emphasizes the unrecognized talents of black poets. As in "Spirituals," the poem acknowledges the modernist's transformation of the musical god Orpheus into a poet, redefining the African American experience with song into a poetic contribution. "Chant for the Great Negro Poet..." asserts that from this rich unsung tradition will come, in the spirit of "Blake" and "Whitman," a great poet of his people. With this particular poem, Taggard's interest in black structures of feeling shifts slightly from using the important, albeit neglected, Black musical tropes to

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Though we all know who Gabriel was, the reference to Willie Smith is more puzzling, particularly for contemporary readers. For example both the Dictionary of African-American Musicians and John Chilton's Who's Who in Jazz list two musicians by the name of Willie Smith: William McLeish (Willie) Smith, (1910-1967), a reed player and vocalist, who played with Jimmie Lunceford in the thirties, and William Henry Joseph Bonaparte Bertholoff (Willie the Lion) Smith (1897-1973), the better known of the two. 'Willie the Lion' Smith was a pianist, composer and vocalist, who played frequently around New York in the thirties. Duke Ellington was apparently one of his ardent fans. But, neither of the men was a trumpeter.

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Taggard has acknowledged elsewhere the dissatisfying nature of the universal "him," when referring to the individual, regardless of gender. Yet the black artist she refers to repeatedly in this series of poems (except, of course, with regard to Marian Anderson) is always, as was custom at the time she wrote, referenced through masculine grammar.

imagine the participation of African Americans in a future where poetic expression has finally achieved its democratic aspirations. Taggard's "negro poet" is both social poet and black christ: "Kin--Blake, Whitman, and the honest preachers of his \ people." In fact "he is heir," she tells us, to "[t]he Hebrew poets." He will produce a new poetry born from the spaces where social oppression and art meet. She insists that he will understand not only just "the powerful mass of his people," but he will share the radical poet's concerns. "He will be our poet when he comes, he will wear \ Scars." These scars also reveal a hope, a "universal singing." Taggard's black poet of the future will keep his own cultural traditions. He will also continue the important tradition of political poetry created through mass social movements, long suppressed by elitist, white male culture.

Genevieve Taggard had a surprisingly prolific career for a writer who has been so thoroughly neglected since her death in November, 1948. Yet considering her dedication to Left culture in the inter-war period it is not impossible to guess her fate in the horrific climate of red-baiting and anti-communist witch-hunts that plagued America's early post-war years. Taggard's retirement from Sarah Lawrence College, where she had taught since the thirties, appears to have occurred under some suspicion. An illness forced her to be hospitalized, but this infirmity needs to be weighted against a cultural illness -- Cold War hysteria and paranoia --, which began infecting American society at the close of World War Two.

After Long View, Taggard published three other books of poems, A Part of

Vermont (1945), Slow Music (1946), and Origin Hawaii (1947), her final book, which gives one last recollection of her childhood home. The revolutionary zeal found in Calling Western Union is quieted in these later volumes, albeit with memorable exceptions in Slow Music, and suggests the difficulty of publishing radical poems in a climate inhospitable to lyrics of social change. In the activist 1960s young American scholars became interested in re-examining Left culture of the 1930s for its obvious kinship as another age of American social activism. However, the New Left suspicions about the rigidity of Old Left political doctrines and their subsequent failures, as well as the masculine biases of the new scholarship showed little interest in Taggard's contributions to Left culture. Yet, like her radical sister, Lola Ridge, Taggard found a new readership in the 'second wave' feminist poetry anthologies, The Women Poets in English, and The World Split Open. Taggard was a "premature socialist-feminist," as Alan Wald characterizes the 30's generation of left-wing women who were concerned with women's issues. One would assume that Taggard's voice might appeal to those second wave feminists who attempted to combine their gender politics with an interest in Socialism. After all, she wrote "new woman" poetry in the twenties -- poems about pregnancy and sexuality --, suggesting that she understood then that the "personal is political," and in the thirties she was writing about women's participation in social and political struggles. It is difficult to say why Taggard's work -- diverse in subject, spirit, and style -- once it began to be read by feminists and radicals in the 1970s, did not remain in the cultural vanguard of American literature. Probably the modern American poetry canon remained too rigid to

welcome her. Perhaps it is testimony to the deep-rooted sexism and conservatism of modern American poetry studies, as well as class biases in feminist studies that has signaled her continued neglect. In a culture where so few people read poetry (though we have no actual statistics), the narrowness of the cannon and the political apathy of many of today's more "mainstream" poets continue Taggard's exclusion. She worked tirelessly for a more open society; the ultimate irony is how the art form she worked in for four decades would be so resistant to the changes she advocated throughout her career. Yet Genevieve Taggard's work is still relevant today, even as the cultures of the Left are fragmented – perhaps beyond repair. If only we would take her advice about poetry: "Swing the great stanza on the pavement, --use \ The public street for publishing good news" ("Definition of Song" (1936)).

Chapter Four

The Girl Who Went to Chicago: Political Culture and Migration in Margaret Walker's For My People.

This is my century--
 Black synthesis of time:
 The freudian slip
 The Marxian mind
 Kierkegaardian Leap of Faith
 and Du Bois prophecy: the color line.
 These are the comrades of Einstein,
 the dawning of another Age,
 new symphony of Time.

("This is My Century," 1983)

Looking back over fifty years of writing poetry from the vantage point of a black woman, Margaret Walker paradoxically names her "black synthesis of time" through conflicting, totalizing ideologies of the white male thinkers, Freud, Marx, Kierkegaard and Einstein. While crossing Du Bois's prophetic "color line," Walker, a celebrated novelist, poet, essayist, and teacher, engages the discourses of class, psychology, religion and science. Yet an important feature missing in her synthesis is gender. The gender consciousness that is absent from the Twentieth Century equation that Walker sets up is more a problem of her Depression era influences, to which the above names belong, than to her development as a black woman writer. How Walker uses these influences, and into what remaining spaces she places her gendered articulations is the focus of this particular discussion.

Walker was 27 years old when she published her first book of poems, For My People; it was the first by an African-American writer to receive a national award--the

1942 Yale Younger Poets prize.¹ To come of age as a black woman writer during the Great Depression required a peculiar sense of awareness of social, political, and economic structures that shaped the artist's manner of seeing. As a black woman, Walker's experience of the Depression was decidedly different from and often more difficult than the realities faced by her white contemporaries. I look at Walker's development as an African-American radical (and feminist) poet and maintain that the radical culture of the 1930s encouraged Walker to struggle with representing the contemporary concerns of 'her people,' as well as providing a historical record of her reading of black structures of feeling. This chapter also follows Margaret Walker's journey across the "color line" in literary forms. The multi-valent design of For My People, from its urban laments and odes of slavery to trickster ballads and sonnets of protest shows, as Cary Nelson suggests, "how a plural textuality can articulate the fragmented, conflicted, sub-cultures of the social formation" (178).

Gender does not play a central role in this discussion of For My People; however, I begin here with a comment on gender, and discuss it in more detail in the later half of the chapter. In various places in the text Walker shows interest in the

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As Walker told Claudia Tate in an interview published in 1983, it actually took her three tries to win the award and get Yale to publish her manuscript. "Stephen Vincent Benet, [himself an award-winning, neglected poet] the editor at that time, wanted to publish it the first time I set it to him from the University of Iowa." Walker completed a masters degree at the University of Iowa Writer's Workshop in 1940. In 1965 she completed a doctorate there. Her thesis was Jubilee, which was published a year later. Walker also informs Tate that Benet had to stage somewhat of a coup in order to get her book published; he refused to nominate any other book. Importantly, Benet came to edit the series no doubt because of the success of his Pulitzer Prize winning, book length civil war poem, John Brown's Body. "I think [Benet] felt they were refusing [to publish For My People] purely on the basis of race" (192).

complicated movements of African American women. Her own fascination with the stories her maternal grandmother told of her own mother's experiences in slavery gave her an early understanding of the significance of women's labor. In fact many of the poems in For My People depict the strength of working women and men in the face of adversity, with their muscular bodies, knowing only exploitation. These representations parallel the Depression era tropes found in the proletarian realist manifestos of Mike Gold as well as Walker's Chicago compatriot Jack Conroy. Importantly, however, Walker is subtle in her characterizations of black female labor; she is cautious of feeding the stereotyped representation of the black female laborer's "super strength." Such a line is drawn in "Lineage," an ironic testimony of gender power created by unfree women and memorialized by a daughter of freedom:

My grandmothers were strong.
 They followed plows and bent to toil.
 They moved through fields sowing seed.
 They touched earth and grain grew.
 They were full of sturdiness and singing.
 My grandmothers were strong.

My grandmothers are full of memories
 Smelling of soap and onions and wet clay.
 With veins rolling roughly over quick hands
 They have many clean words to say.
 My grandmothers were strong
 Why am I not as they?

The poem explores the writer's regret at the divide created between her life as a black female intellectual and the laboring history of her female ancestors: "Why am I not as they?" she asks. While the poem is written at a time when its author is just unearthing the fact that intellectual labor is also "labor," she projects an inferior status

upon her manner of toil to the far superior physical work performed by her grandmothers who "moved through fields sowing seed." The grandmothers with their "many clean words to say" importantly reverse the idea of physical labor as *dirty*; mental labor in its distance from sweat and earth becomes *dirty*; it is, in a sense, ineffectual; it *yields* nothing. In fact Walker refigures a popular proletarian trope, and writes black women into proletarian literature, by subordinating intellectual desire and angst to the laboring black woman who "followed plows and bent to toil." Indeed, "Why am I not as they?" Walker laments her own disconnection from the *real* work of her ancestors by asking how is it that women with far fewer choices than the poem's speaker were able to create and maintain unimaginable worlds against unimaginable odds?

While "Lineage" explores Walker's concerns *for her people* arguably from a feminist perspective, she does not entertain a separate struggle for black women in the text as a whole. For Walker it appears that dominant cultural tropes such as class, psychology, and religion play a larger role in her articulations of African American experience. Later in this chapter I focus upon several poems whose representations of black female experience as distinct from black community experience in general offer additional insights into Walker's awareness of gender difference and black experience within the already complicated practice of poetry during the nineteen thirties. Hazel Carby's critique of black feminist criticism's essentialism is useful in exploring Walker's multi-layered literary project in which she collapses the discourses of region and class as well as the totalizing concepts of Freud, Kierkegaard, and Einstein that

shape her "black synthesis of time," as she publishes her poetry collection in the largely conservative, east coast, white male literary marketplace. Carby maintains that black feminist criticism has been too frequently reduced "to an experiential relationship that exists between black women as critics and black women as writers who represent black women's reality" (16). She argues that the essentialist focus on a common language between black women creates an ahistorical discourse out of a socially diverse set of historical perimeters. She contends that "no language or experience is divorced from the shared context in which different groups that share a language express their different group interests" (17). As Carby assesses that "the terrain of language is a terrain of power relations," she reminds us of what Walker seems to have been discovering with For My People, (though Carby speaks specially of the convergence of the terms black and feminist, which she argues "cannot be absolute, transhistorical forms...of identity"), that historical specificity and awareness of "differently oriented social interests" are encoded within the same "sign community" (17).² Walker's specific glances at women must also be accompanied by a reminder of the "sign" as "an arena of struggle"(17). In the same light however, as I read the poems in which Walker explores the bodies of black women and men side by

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Carby's critique from Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist, (New York: Oxford UP, 1987) focuses upon the work of earlier black-feminist theorists Barbara Smith, Barbara Christian, and Deborah McDowell. Carby's critique of McDowell is particularly interesting in light of my reading of Margaret Walker's radical verse. McDowell criticizes Barbara Smith's overtly political agenda, yet still left unanswered what exactly she envisions theoretically from a "sound, thorough articulation of the Black feminist aesthetic" (quoted in Carby, 13).

side in labor, their complicated relations with each other must be tacitly understood, as well as the complicated relations with the larger white world that has invented an intricate social as well as political nexus in which to scrutinize, subdue and exclude African Americans. Moreover, it is necessary to see Walker's work as a product of not only black community influences (and its women), but of the male left, which, as her friendship with Richard Wright attested, was not generally interested in gender issues.

Margaret Walker was born in Birmingham, Alabama in 1915. She went north to attend Northwestern University and spent the decade of the thirties working and writing in Chicago. In 1949 she became a professor of English, and later founded the black studies program, at Jackson State University in Mississippi. Critical attention to Walker's work focuses almost exclusively on her evocations of southern life. Walker is perhaps best known for her important best-selling novel Jubilee, which she worked on for nearly thirty years, and is based upon her great-grandmother's experiences as slave during the Civil War.³ The critical work on For My People has tended to emphasize the text's geographical aspects, its connection to the landscape of the American south as well as its articulation of myth and ritual within the contexts of the

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Walker's thirty year struggle with Jubilee is exemplified in Tillie Olsen's feminist classic, Silences: "It is humanly impossible for a woman who is a wife and mother to work on a regular teaching job and write" (209). By quoting Walker's experience writing her novel, Olsen depicted one of the many "silences" belonging to women writers as part of a shared history. I suppose it is only fitting that a creative work detailing the life of a female slave should have faced so many obstacles on its road to completion.

African diaspora.⁴ Though it would be inaccurate to de-emphasize the centrality of the tropes of the South in her work, Walker's participation in the northern migration - her early years in Chicago -- had a significant impact on her construction of southern life in For My People, and needs to be more thoroughly engaged.⁵ During her years in Chicago, Walker was exposed to the proletarian literary tradition through her close associations with Richard Wright, her participation in the South-side Writer's Group (affiliated with the Federal Writer's Project of the Works Progress Administration), and her membership in the Chicago chapter of the League of American Writers. I maintain the importance of reading For My People as informed by both South and North, the journey and the arrival, the rural and the urban, her Chicago years, the Marxist influence upon her work, as well as her infusion of working class politics into African American myth and ritual. I also suggest the dual importance of the Great

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An unpublished essay by Jim Werner, "Let a New Earth Rise: Landscapes of Mystery, Sorrow and Hope in Margaret Walker's *For My People*" focuses upon the landscape. Discussions of Southern black folklife and its traditions Eugenia Collier explores the language and the 'natural world' in the text in her essay "Fields Watered with Blood: Myth and Ritual in the Poetry of Margaret Walker" (in Black Women Writers, 1950-1980: A Critical Evaluation, Ed. Marie Evans. New York: Anchor / Doubleday, 1984). Richard K. Barksdale's "Margaret Walker: Folk Orature and Historical Prophecy" (in Black American Poets between Worlds, 1940-1960, Ed. R. Baxter Miller. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1986) details myth and religion in For My People. All three essays focus on Walker's evocation of racism, but do not emphasize the ideological influences of the Great Migration and the Great Depression on her work.

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Obviously to ignore the segregated South is to deny Walker a sense of place in both the literal and figurative sense. As she wrote in the late 1980s: "The South is my home, and my adjustment or accommodation to it--whether real or imagined (mythic and legendary), violent or non-violent--is the subject and source of all my poetry. It is also my life" (This Is My Century xvii). (bold mine).

Migration and the Great Depression on Walker's movement from southern "petty bourgeois" black society into the social and cultural spaces of northern cities, including her discovery "that people who worked with their brains were also workers" ("Growing Out of the Shadows" 7).

For My People is very much a text of discovery, and Walker's realization "that people who worked with their brains were also workers" allowed her to place herself within the discourse of race and class consciousness as these began to infuse African-American writing in the 1930s. Whereas the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s exemplified race pride at the level of cultural trope, the radical lyrics that Walker and other African American poets began to produce in the thirties called for a more militant expression, a demand for lyrical evocations of the need for social transformation: "Let a race of men now rise and take control" is how Walker closes "For My People." This poem, which I will discuss in more detail later, depicts the immensely complicated and arduous movements African American men and women have made through immutably hostile terrain, while searching in these movements for the possibility of social change.

For My People challenges the modernist poetics of the American male left by bringing to it a black, gendered vision. The book is divided into three parts, each exploring distinct African American cultural, social, and historical tropes. The first section contains stylistically varied, experimental poems about black social history, with emphasis on the southern landscape. The second section contains rearticulations of African American folklore, from the labor hero, John Henry, to the infamous

trickster bad boy, Staggolee. Importantly Walker's insistence on representing black female social and communal agency presents some feisty heroines who refigure the folklore genre's male-centered biases. The third and final section is comprised of sonnets. Though these sonnets were criticized by several of the book's reviewers, and as Walker claims, her friends, "the black male scholars and critics" (xvii) also maligned them, they resist and collapse the associations that the sonnet has had in traditional discussions of the form. Like her radical white sisters, Lola Ridge and Genevieve Taggard, Walker wrote "political" sonnets, and she crowned them with blunt titles such as "Whores" and "The Struggle Staggers Us." These sonnets, like Ridge's "Electrocution," and Taggard's "Silence in Majorca," are left intellectual women's ways of turning the form, with its conventional subject of love or honor, on its head; the tension and resolution found in the first and final sections of the sonnet form, get quite a jolt as they convey the affects of the death penalty, of fascism and of racism.⁶

I. The title poem of the same name that opens "For My People" is perhaps the

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It is important to mention the work of Gwendolyn Brooks, a Chicago poet whose first book of poems, A Street in Bronzeville (1945), is an important evocation of black Chicago. It is not clear how well Walker and Brooks knew each other, and whether any rivalries existed between them as young, talented black women. Brooks's second book, Annie Allen, published in 1949 and winner of the Pulitzer Prize, contained a number of sonnets, and according to Walker herself, the technical polish of these poems evidenced "racial vindication" for black poets under the scrutiny of white critics who thought their work lacked "form and intellectual acumen" (110). See Walker's essay originally published in *Phylon* in 1950, "New Poets of the Forties." How I Wrote Jubilee and Other Essays on Life and Literature. New York: Feminist Press, 1990.

best introduction to the book as a whole, particularly in a reading that emphasizes the cultural and historical material that informed its production.⁷ "For My People" is a powerful mantra-like, prose verse testimonial on the experiences of African Americans. It moves chronologically from the culture of slavery, to the author's bitter present of "hypocrisy and misunderstanding," and finally to a militant resolution in the closing stanza calling for "another world to be born" in which "martial songs" replace "dirges," and a "new earth" unfolds for a new generation of people fully shaped by a revolutionary black consciousness.⁸ "For My People" is a poem that captures an important American historical moment as the Black South moves North; it is a text of migration and rural dislocation. The poem is a brief, evocative tour through African American social history. Though Walker was only 21 years old when

⁷ In an interview conducted by Alferdteen Harrison in 1992 to accompany a collection of photographs by Ronald Freeman, honoring the text, Walker remarked the following about writing For My People:

...I wrote these poems...in the decade of the 1930s. It was a period of depression—black people suffered along with everyone else from lack of jobs, from lack of standard housing, from lack of appropriate schooling. We were literally outcast from the general society. But then there were poor white people, too, and poor working people. It was a time when unions were struggling to have collective bargaining, to have a forty-hour week (9).

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Walker claims that it was Nelson Algren, whom she knew from the Chicago Writer's Project, who suggested the urgency of the last stanza, and urged her to state her vision of the future. The use of the word "earth" to begin the final stanza also merits mention, for it is a word connected to people's fights for "land," for resistance to domination. Thus Walker suggests with it a kind of self-determination for African Americans. One might also recall texts like Pearl Buck's The Good Earth, about the plight of Chinese peasants, or Joris Ivens' cinematic portrait of the Spanish Republic's resistance to Franco, The Spanish Earth.

she wrote and published the poem (it first appeared in Poetry magazine), its sense of urgency and surge of awareness describes a remark she makes fifty years later in an interview in the Mississippi Quarterly: "I have no desire to separate myself from what I am...from my race, from my gender, from my nationality, and from my consciousness. I'm black, woman, writer; I'm very Black Nationalist" (527).

The poem's opening emphasis is on the cultural products of slavery--"dirges" and "ditties," "blues" and "jubilees"; it also explains Walker's more general attraction to folk ritual, which permeates the entire book. She presents the aesthetic practice of "slave songs," however, in contradictory fashion, creating a tension between musical settings: lamentations, devotionals, and popular balladry. Yet importantly, behind the powerful spiritual intensity created through song is the tacit reminder that such tropes are also products of domination, of a subduing of spirit and will. As the stanza closes, the songs are rounded out by "knees" bending "humbly" in prayer to an "unseen power." Walker fuses the attitudes of her Methodist upbringing with the Marxism of Chicago radicals: if resistance is to be created it must be done through an understanding of one's surroundings. As the poem proceeds, it explores the variance and incongruities of developing and maintaining race, class, and gender consciousness, keeping alive "humble" folk traditions while yearning for all of the forms culture can take.

The poem's momentum is best characterized by a vocabulary of activity, while each stanza replicates a stage in the life cycle from birth, to adulthood, and finally toward regeneration. The present continuous tense used in the second and seventh

stanzas suggests the exhaustion of labor without any of the romanticization that certain types of proletarian poetry have used to mute the grim realities of working class life. (ft—examples) Walker laments the "strength" of her people being spent "washing ironing cooking scrubbing sewing mending \ hoeing plowing digging planting pruning patching \ dragging along." She spares us the commas; these tasks run one into the other. Endless and mindless, they describe a people "never gaining never reaping never knowing and never understanding." Again no commas: and even then, out-of-breath readers will not know the half of it. Importantly, this straining toil, evoking Southern labor on the land, is matched in the seventh stanza's evocations of displacement, probably to metaphorize the disorientation caused by the northern migration: "For my people walking blindly spreading joy, losing time being lazy, sleeping when hungry, shouting when burdened, \ drinking when hopeless." In fact the poem's sixth stanzas, which just precedes the above lines, speaks directly of dislocation, whether caused by the move north in which so many African Americans took part, or the equally disordering move from country to city:

For my people thronging 47th Street in Chicago and Lenox
Avenue in New York and Rampart Street in New
Orleans, lost disinherited dispossessed and happy
people filling the cabarets and taverns and other
people's pockets needing bread and shoes and milk and
land and money and something--something all our own

The wants and needs and desires that are evoked by the use of the conjunction "and," always a grammar of continuation, characterize the sense of being "lost disinherited dispossessed." Yet Walker is careful to construct contradiction within the interstices of movement: "lost disinherited dispossessed and happy \ people" fill "cabarets and

taverns." There is desire even in dislocation, the search for something "all our own," a people who, in the penultimate stanza, try to "fashion a better way \ from confusion;" they attempt to refashion themselves within their new surroundings.

Two million African-Americans migrated from the South to the North between 1900 and 1930. Post-bellum life for southern blacks continued to be limiting in every conceivable way — socially, politically, personally, and most evident, financially.⁹ A prominent visual image that appeared during the period of the Great Migration was the newspaper photograph of African-Americans — men, women, and children — boarding trains by the hundreds for the great northern cities: Chicago, New York, Detroit, Washington, Cleveland, Philadelphia. Chicago's preeminent black newspaper The Defender advertised jobs hoping to lure young black men to the booming, industrial city.¹⁰ Although black men would benefit far more than black women in terms of job choice and financial reward, women were no less anxious to be part of

⁹ Historian Jacqueline Jones cites a number of clear reasons for the northward move among southern blacks:

[There was]...the oppressive sharecropping system, disenfranchisement, Jim Crow laws, a plague of boll weevils working its way toward the Cotton Belt. When World War I opened up employment possibilities in the industrial Northeast and Midwest, mass migration began in earnest: the lure of high wages and a freer life proved irresistible to a people limited to agricultural and domestic service in the land of neoslavery (153).

¹⁰ An important aspect of these ads was their mention of employment opportunities that would have been impossible to conceive of in the South. One ad read:

Laborers wanted for foundry, warehouse and yard work. Excellent opportunity to learn trades, paying good money. Start \$2.50 - \$2.75 per day. Extra for overtime (qtd. in Takaki 343).

the migration. In fact, men who migrated along with their wives looked forward to seeing them treated fairly not only as workers, but as shoppers as well. Yet an important consideration for this discussion of Walker's early poetry as a product of the northern migration is, as Jacqueline Jones maintains, "[f]ew migrants, male or female, abandoned the South totally or irrevocably" (159).¹¹ Individuals made frequent returns, relatives were sent for, money and goods flowed south, but southern goods were also sent north, and of course the culture and lore people brought with them. One positive irrevocable change that the Great Migration affected was the cultural contact between the black south and the largely white north. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. writes of the important cultural significance of the Migration: "Just as slavery inadvertently created a new "African" culture -- a New World Western, Pan-African culture and ethnicity -- so, too, did the Great Migration create a new culture, one northern and urban yet thoroughly southern in its roots" (17).

Margaret Walker claims her reason for coming north in the early 1930s to attend Northwestern, her father's alma mater, was based on Langston Hughes' advice. Hughes felt her writing talent could never be nurtured in the south.¹² Yet the north as a place of opportunity was not without its own incongruities. The discrimination she

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Jacqueline Jones provides fascinating details of black female migrants in her chapter: "*To Get out of This Land of Suffering: Black Women Migrants in the North, 1900-1930*" from her award-winning book Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family, from Slavery to the Present. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.

¹² For a discussion of Walker's friendship with and admiration for Langston Hughes see her essay "A Literary Legacy from Dunbar to Baraka," in How I Wrote Jubilee and Other Essays. New York: Feminist Press, 1990.

assumed would be reversed in the north, she soon discovered was an everyday reality as well for her northern sisters and brothers. In an autobiographical essay first published in 1943, Walker notes her surprise that the expectations she had about northern "opportunities" and "promises" were proved wrong. She quickly understood that racism did not disappear once one crossed the Mason-Dixon line. "In the South," she writes,

I had always thought that, naturally, white people had more money than colored people. Poor white trash signified for me the lazy scum of the marginal fringe of society with no excuse for poverty. Now I discovered there were poor white working people exploited by rich white people. I learned that all Jews were not rich. I discovered that all Negroes were not even in the same economic class. While there were no Negro multi-millionaires, there were many wealthy Negroes who made money by exploiting the poor Negroes, who had some of the same attitudes toward them that rich whites had toward poor whites and that prejudiced whites have toward all Negroes (6).¹³

She also writes about being "refused service in restaurants in Evanston and Chicago time and time again" (6). Though this is but one of many instances of northern racist practice it had a symbolic resonance for African Americans that would eventually give birth to actions such as the SNCC lunch-counter sit-ins during the nascent years of the Civil Rights Movement.

As the above stanza describes "people thronging 47th Street in Chicago,"

¹³ Walker continues with an important contradiction:

Imagine my amazement to hear a white girl tell me she was forced to leave Northwestern because she had no money. But I, a poor Negro girl, had stayed even when I had no money. They never threatened me with expulsion. Yet I did not find a white school in the Middle West free of prejudice. All around me was prejudice. To understand the issues out of which it grew became my life's preoccupation (7).

Walker was herself a witness to these migrating bodies during her years in that important Midwestern city. The need and desire, the sense of dislocation and urgency evoked by Walker's harsh descriptions, register a lament and longing for the South as "home." However, there is also a hint of vibrancy; cities like Chicago still offered hope. "47th Street in Chicago" was a hub of African American community and activity and must have surely given Walker a sense of identity, albeit complex and contradictory, even if she did see herself as a transplanted southerner. Whatever suggestions of despair Walker finds in the crowded streets of Chicago's black belt is characteristically different from the tone set by writers St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton in their pivotal urban study Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City. Richard Wright, who wrote the introduction to the first edition published in 1945, describes the book as an important "scientific report upon the state of unrest, longing, hope among urban Negroes" (xxv).¹⁴ In fact, Wright classifies this work of black sociology along the lines of the tradition of Western intellectual investigations suggested by Walker in the epigraph to this chapter.¹⁵ Drake and

¹⁴

Richard Wright's ethnic construction of Chicago is examined in an impressive book by Carla Capetti, Writing Chicago: Modernism, Ethnography, and the Novel. (New York: Columbia UP, 1993). The book also explores the ethnic identification of two other Chicago radical writers, Nelson Algren and James T. Farrell.

¹⁵

Towards the end of his introduction Wright asks "What would life on Chicago's South Side look like when seen through the eyes of a Freud, a Joyce, a Proust, a Pavlov, a Kierkegaard?" Wright's own important autobiographical story, "The Man Who Went to Chicago," from which I draw the title of this chapter, attempted to characterize life for Chicago's black migrants during the Depression. Wright's indebtedness to white male western thought is curiously complicated by his homage to an important female modern and what had influenced her: "It should be recalled in

Cayton describe "Bronzeville," the name given to Chicago's south side with 47th Street as its main thoroughfare, with a liveliness in sharp contrast to the white world surrounding and enclosing it. A "continuous eddy of faces—black, brown, olive, yellow, and white" (379) circulates through a neighborhood filled with its own newspapers, professionals, clerks and policemen. Theatres and billboards announcing black art and entertainment, a plethora of churches, steady streams of shoppers, agents, "irate tenants," job seekers, and picketers create a vital atmosphere of heterodox enterprise. Yet Drake and Cayton are equally aware of the temptation to romanticize what Walker so pointedly avoids doing in her poem. The thronging bodies of 47th Street inhabit a ghetto; they are casualties of a Jim Crow system, and the reminders of their separation and their enforced poverty are ever present and everywhere reminders of a people "preyed on by a facile force of state and fad and novelty," as Walker tells us in "For My People." Richard Wright, too, expressed, in his introduction to Drake's and Cayton's report, a sense of the city's contradictions. His dialectical response was no doubt something he was able to share with Walker during the years of their friendship in Chicago:

Chicago is the city from which the most incisive and radical Negro thought has come; there is an open and raw beauty about the city that seems either to kill or endow one with the spirit of life. I felt those extremes of possibility, death and hope, while I lived half hungry and afraid in a city to which I had fled with the dumb yearning to write, to tell my story (xvii).

this connection that Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives*, which contained "Melanctha," the first long serious literary treatment of Negro life in the United States, was derived from Stein's preoccupation with Jamesian psychology" (xxxix).

A sense of despair, of crampedness, of wonder and discovery, the contradictions and confusions that make up the bemused quest of a people cut off from their past and determined to fashion a future set the pace for Walker's final message in "For My People." In her forecast looms "a bloody peace written in the sky," the birth of a "second generation full of courage," and a "beauty full of healing and strength," to name a few. But these requisites belong to a hope predicated upon a belief, shared by many radical writers of the 1930s, in social transformation: "let a new race of men now rise and take control."¹⁶

II Walker's militancy in these last lines reflects her education as a black intellectual together with her Chicago thirties' Marxist education.¹⁷ Yet it is

¹⁶

Walker, because she is writing in an age before a specific consciousness about inclusive language had developed, uses "men," though she implies women too. Walker was certainly aware of the sexism within her own community, but was also fully aware of the improbability of making any social gains without the full participation of both sexes. Yet it is also worth noting that, as I mentioned earlier in the text, the influence of the white male left, and the absence of an articulated feminist consciousness amongst its female members, may have left the poet unaware to question whether the new race of "men" in control would be willing to share its power with women, particularly black women.

¹⁷

In the early thirties, during the Communist Party's "third period" dedication to the revolutionary working class, calls for a new black nation in the South influenced a number of pro-Party black intellectuals and workers. For differing views on blacks and the Communist Party see the revisionist histories of Robin D.G. Kelley, Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1991, and Mark Naison, Communists in Harlem during the Depression. (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1983). For a more traditionally critical view see Harold Cruse, Crisis of the Negro Intellectual. New York: William Morrow, 1967.

interesting to see the dichotomy created in the black nationalist desire of "For My People" when reading it with a later poem like "Today." This poem, written in a similar style as "For My People," with its enjambed, unpunctuated lines, calculates race intolerance in America with the "international" fight against racial oppression in fascist Europe. The black nation as it rises in America must gaze across the Atlantic to see a new "race" of men arising and taking control in Europe -- the white "aryan" race calling for the obliteration of the "other." "Today" was written just as war was commencing in Europe.¹⁸ Like "For My People," it transcends, yet remains a creation of the Chicago years. Ideologically, Walker embraces a tacit left internationalism with an implicit prompt that racial oppression has fueled war in Europe. The poem juxtaposes "Middle America" with "Middle Europe," and a contradiction takes shape. Because the poem was written before the United States entered the war, instead of containing images of home front pride, the poet creates a linguistic surface on which to convey indignation at the nation's apathy in the face of world problems.

"Today" is also a radical rewriting of Walt Whitman's "I Hear America Singing" and "I Sing the Body Electric." In fact it is closer to the pessimism and indignation expressed in the late Whitman of Democratic Vistas. Rather than

¹⁸ Walker's prose-like style in "Today" with the first line of each stanza indented and the reverse in "For My People" in which all the lines per stanza except the first are indented may have been inspired by Langston Hughes' 1922 poem "Negro:"

I am a Negro:
 Black as the night is black,
 Black like the depths of my Africa...

celebrating the possibilities of America, Walker begins her song, using Whitmanesque prose\verse form, to cast a shadow of doubt on the future of humanity: "I sing of slum scabs on city \ faces..." In fact her lamentations reach far beyond the ghettos she has walked through to draw a line that will connect them to the cities of Europe as they anticipate and experience bombing: "scrawny children scarred by bombs and dying of \ hunger..." Then she reminds us again of the American landscape dotted with her people as "wretched human scarecrows strung against \ lynching stakes..." And of course workers, black and white, "dying of pellagra and silicosis..." Walker closes the stanza by metaphorizing shelter as part of the social phenomenon of lack represented by "rotten \ houses falling on slowly decaying humanity." In many ways "Today" emblemizes the complicated structures of oppression. In fact, she communicates beyond the America she sings to situate her critique at the global level. Walker has argued in a number of her essays and interviews that economic inequity is the primary source of all oppression and that her poetry as a whole has been written to address this fact. As she assessed her work in a 1983 interview with critic Claudia Tate, "What's wrong with ["our present-day society, our whole world"] is money, honey, money" (193).

Whereas Whitman "sings" in his "body electric" as a praise of the human body in its social engagement with the luscious body of its rich, capacious land -- America --, Walker sings that body struggling against decay, over-work and exhaustion, where praise must be mediated through unrelenting pain and sorrow:

I sing of Man's struggle to be
clean, to be useful, to be free; of need arising from our lives,

of bitter living flowing in our laughter, of cankerous mutiny
eating through the nipples of our breasts.

I sing of our soon-to-be-dead,
of last escape: drunkard raising flasks to his lips never
tasting the solace, gambler casting his last die never
knowing the win, lover seeking lips of the beloved never
tasting fruit of his kiss, never knowing the languorous sleep.

Contradicting Whitman's texts of American abundance, the singing of "Today" represents American lack. "To be clean, to be useful," the body here is hardly replete; its "laughter" is the "bitter" gall of living. To be human in Walker's "Today" in the U.S.A. is to be half-living or "soon to be dead," to be drunk, but without consolation. It is wager without potential prize and romantic love without consummation. The American body which she sings has been exploited beyond pleasure. The Depression that encloses her words has paved its way to war: She ends the first section with a biblical foreboding: "I sing these fragments of living that you may know by these presents that which we feared most has come upon us." The specter of fascism haunts the poem's second section. The poet discontinues the Whitmanesque sorrow songs; she represents America's complacency by suggesting its removal from Europe's theatre of bombs. She even points a finger: "You walking these common \ neighboring streets with no disturbing drone of bombing \ planes..." Though it appears the sense of desperation described in the poem's first section attempts to unite a common degraded humanity, the poem as a whole suggests how distant are those Americans from the fact that they are "fearing no severed baby arms nor naked \ eyeballs hurtled in [their] hands:" Instead Americans have unappreciated advantages "riding trolley and jitney \ daily, buying gas and light hourly." Moreover,

they have the joys of popular culture, (a theatre without bombs): "Wild West Indian and Shooting Sam," "Mama Loves Papa," and "Gone by the Breeze." "Today" is an anti-fascist poem and a critique of America, which like its popular culture is "complacently smug in a snug somnolence." The fate of Europe's war victims might also be a tacit reminder about America's denial of its own history of racial hatred and violence. Although Walker confronts American complacency before it entered the war, a comment by her friend Richard Wright written after the war, and after their friendship had ended, is perhaps not far from Walker's own imaginings: Would America, when "brought face to face with the problem of the Negro, collapse in a moral spasm, as did Europe when confronted with the problem of the Jew" (xxxi)?

As Walker juxtaposes Europe's war-ravaged body with a "Middle America \ distantly removed..." she chides the American body for busying itself with "petty personals." She lists consumer goods unavailable to allied women in Europe such as: "eyemaline," "henna rinse," "dental cream." She reproves America for its privileges and records the guilt-filled inactivity of the white middle class "washing your lives with pity, smoothing your ways with vague apologies." The *cleansing* suggested by the list of personal care products and the "washing" and the "smoothing" of "lives" and "ways" tacitly represents America's isolation from the rise of fascism across the Atlantic, while tacitly reflecting the apathy and denial that is placated by trivialities in a time of crisis.

In the poem's final stanza, Walker alludes to the structures of belief that

appear to shelter individuals from a wider understanding of the economic disenfranchisement and dislocation she sees at the center of oppression, both on the national and international scale:

Pray the Men of Mars to
descend upon you. Pray Jehovah to send his prophets before
the avenging fire. Pray for second sight and inner ear. Pray
for bulwark against poaching patterns of dislocated days;
pray for buttressing iron against insidious termite and beetle
and locust and flies and lice and moth and rust and mold.

Here Walker seems to take on the role of preacher and prophet to curse the lukewarm. She both borrows from and challenges the religious language of Black culture. She also equates the trope of Armageddon as it is preached in Black churches with the bombs falling on Middle Europe. The "buttressing iron" hints at the manufacture of war; the biblical plagues of "locust and flies" ask its audience to acknowledge that war might be a wake-up call. To close "Today" with the language of religious forboding importantly links Walker's social consciousness to the consciousness of African Americans decidedly shaped by the Christian church.

It should be noted that religion played an important role in Margaret Walker's upbringing. She believed in religion, which sets her apart from a good many other writers on the left, while it connected her to Black people and many white protestants. Both her parents were deeply religious, and her father was a biblical scholar as well as a Methodist minister. Yet two critiques of religion are prevalent in For My People, the palliative role that religion plays in communities where prayer replaces social action and political resistance, and the forcing of the white man's religion onto the slave communities in the new world. In "Since 1619," for example, Walker,

referring to the year the first slave ship reached North America, laments: "How many years since 1619 have I been singing Spirituals? \ How long have I been praising God and shouting hallelujahs?" The collective voice, the poem's construction as a series of self-defining questions, speaks of a weariness and anger that the "hallelujahs" in thrall to the "money-gods" cannot quite penetrate; these are, after all, epochs of misdirected voices. Thus she asks "[w]hen will I burst from my kennel an angry mongrel. \ Lean and hungry and tired of my dry bones and years?" This questioning trope, the desire to see her people develop the necessary consciousness to take action, is an important feature echoed throughout the first section of For My People. Yet Walker is also concerned here with the complicated nature of the battle to free the self from superstition, from pie in the sky platitudes, and from all forms of indoctrination connected to slavery's rhetoric—its institutionalization and its aftermath.¹⁹

Walker writes the complicated nature of belief and its contradictory role as a trope of resistance in the poem "We Have Been Believers." The poem also explores how Africans in America created a new cultural body by assimilating "the black gods

19

Horace Cayton, whose Black Metropolis, I use here to explore aspects of Chicago's black community of which Walker was part in her teens and twenties, remarks years later to Studs Terkel, the significant impact the black church had on sustaining its community. He claims the Communist Party "raised issues that Negroes were interested in," but they "made very little inroads." According to Cayton, "[o]ne of the reasons the Communists flopped is they didn't know how to deal with the Negro church. The church was the first Negro institution, preceding even the family in stability" (qtd. in Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression. New York: Pantheon Books, 1970, 1986. 434-438). (Cayton here also derides the C.P. for its "vulgar Marxist thing," in Black Metropolis, published in 1945; however, he maintains the important role the Communists played in promoting black leadership within the C.I.O as well as pushing the organization's commitment to racial equality. See my discussion below).

of an old land" with "the white gods of a new land..." With this conflation of old and new she renders belief as dichotomy: "we have been believers \ believing in the mercy of our masters and the beauty of \ our brothers." Each stanza of "We Have Been Believers" exposes the contradictions inherent in the integration of black belief into the white man's world, and it is important to see that this belief is both tenacious and transformative. For example, stanza three begins: "Neither the slave's whip nor the lynchers' rope nor the \ bayonet could kill our black belief," and ends by acknowledging a radical Puritan creed: "we have been believers in the new Jerusalem." Yet Walker is perhaps most concerned here with the relationship of faith and labor. As "silent and stolid and stubborn and \ strong" as black belief has been, there is behind it the tacit question of whose new Jerusalem will be built. Importantly, that the American economy could not have survived and grown as it did without the slave labor of African Americans is a fact that can no longer be ignored.²⁰

We have been believers yielding substance for the world.
 With our hands have we fed a people and out of our
 strength have they wrung the necessities of a nation.
 Our song has filled the twilight and our hope has
 heralded the dawn.

Walker became quite interested in the plight of contemporary black labor during her years in Chicago. Her interest in labor issues and worker militancy seems to have been shaped by her contact with radical writers in the WPA. In letters of the

²⁰ A ground-breaking work on this subject that helped foster further studies on the contribution of blacks to the building of this country is Eugene D. Genovese's The Political Economy of Slavery. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1965). An important later study by the same author is Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made. (U of North Carolina P, 1976).

period that Walker wrote to Richard Wright after he had left Chicago for New York, she discusses union matters concerning the Writers Project. By becoming an "organized" intellectual worker she was able to feel empowered in ways the generations she speaks of in her poems were not. Though Walker's participation in the Federal Writers Project in Chicago brought her in contact with various forms of radical practices, the Communist Party being the most prominent, Walker has claimed that it was the C.I.O., rather than the Party, that spoke to her and other members of Chicago's black community. As Drake and Cayton write of the C.I.O.'s influence on African-Americans in Chicago: "Belief in racial equality was a component part of its ideology, and was kept constantly before the membership by a vigorous left-wing minority within the C.I.O. Formerly skeptical of "the white man's union," both the Negro workers and the Negro community became pro-C.I.O." (313).²¹ Black skepticism of unions had been traditionally maintained by companies using them as strike breakers. Employers also used race hatred and fear consistently to divide workers. As the C.I.O. became an emblem for workers to embrace class solidarity, it also became one of the first arenas in which black workers could question and condemn racial inequality. The C.I.O.'s organizing tactics to attract African Americans were not only centered on fighting discrimination in the work place, but in protesting segregation, as well as campaigning for fair housing practices and overall

²¹ Drake and Cayton also claim that "[e]ven conservative Negro leaders who professed shock at the "radicalism" and deplored the "violence" of the new unions, praised them for their stand on race relations" (314).

improved living conditions.²² Of course the CIO could offer no absolute guarantee that discrimination would fade from the work place, but as one worker admitted contemplating "the former role of [African Americans] as strike-breakers," ... "[r]ace prejudice will only be overcome through a sustained campaign of education. It will take years to do this. We need the universities, the radio, the press to help us" (Drake and Cayton 339). Walker's strong desire for economic democracy and her equation of racism with inequitable economic distribution are metaphorised throughout For My People. These poems became her contribution to reminding both black and white communities of the plight of its workers and their invisible status in the making of America.

Perhaps it is Margaret Walker's belief in industrial organizing, which she felt would more successfully integrate blacks into American economic life than any Communist Party rhetoric could promise, that allows her to end "We Have Been

22

One strike of major importance in the annals of C.I.O militancy in the 1930s was the Republic Steel Strike. In May of 1937 20,000 workers at the South Chicago based plant walked off their jobs. They struck for "union recognition and a wage increase" (321). Margaret Walker's memory of the Republic Steel strike is probably more closely connected to an incident of the strike that made national headlines, and became known as "The Memorial Day Massacre." She in fact confessed to Richard Wright in a letter written a month after the event that her attempts to produce a poem on the subject did not prove "effective." Drake and Cayton describe the massacre as follows:

On Sunday, May 30, 1937, a crowd of some 5,000 people [white and black]-- strikers, their wives and children, and union sympathizers--were assembled near the plant for purposes of mass picketing and demonstrations. During the afternoon a disturbance occurred and the police fired into the crowd. Ten workers were killed, and nine more persons were injured. The police were severely and widely denounced for unprovoked and excessive brutality. They claimed they were "attacked," but impartial evidence assembled at the time contained nothing to justify their conduct (321).

Believers" with the same kind of strident phrasing with which she closes "For My People."

We have been believers believing in our burdens and our
demigods too long. Now the needy no longer weep and
pray; the long-suffering arise, and our fists bleed
against the bars with a strange insistency.

Walker's representation of the culture of belief imbedded into African American life reflects the strong spiritual influences of her southern background. It is not surprising that the South, and the conflicting set of images associated with it, permeate For My People. Though I do not focus exclusively on Walker's evocations of southern life, it is important to consider how, as a radical poet, she imagines and shapes the South's problematic history. The location of the writer is another important consideration. Walker's poems are products of the northern migration and in their scripted distance they present a dichotomous twist in terms of representation. They reproduce the migration as a text, much the same way Jacob Lawrence's paintings did in his series "The Migration of the Negro;" these aesthetic documents record the experience of many.²³ Moreover, they speak both longingly and angrily of the South. They also contain a sense of militancy familiar to Depression era readers of poetry. As angry indictments of slavery and the continuation of racial exploitation

²³

Jacob Lawrence (1917-), only a few years Walker's junior, also began his artistic career with the help of the W.P.A's Federal Artists Project. "The Migration of the Negro" series were completed in 1943. In many ways it is a complementary artistic testimony to For My People. It might be argued that Langston Hughes's "proletarian" poetry of the 1930s (that, under pressure, he later renounced in a 1949 article in Phylon) serves as companion testimony to these two previously mentioned Black cultural projects. And all three should be "read" together.

in its aftermath, they concretize social and economic injustice. Walker often uses the angry linguistic codes of the labor chants from the radical literary circles in which she travelled while in Chicago, but she exchanges the northern industrial setting for the rural south. While the north has always represented 'more relative' freedom for African Americans, yet the south is 'kin.' A kind of schizophrenia develops. The South is a place longed for, at the same time its need for transformation is acknowledged. Thus Walker finds herself creating from two places, the material realities that inspired the northern migration, and the southern homeland that resides inside her heart.

The poem "Sorrow Home" exemplifies this sense of displacement. Its title alone suggests it could be an anthem for the two million African Americans who went north in the first three decades of this century. (Jones ft). As she speaks for her people in this poem, Walker takes a glance backward. She confesses "[m]y roots are deep in southern life...I was sired and weaned \ in a tropic world." She continues to remind readers of the lushness in stark contrast to "steel and wood and brick far from the sky" that is Chicago. "Warm skies and gulf blue streams are in my blood. I belong \ with the smell of fresh pine, with the trail of coon, and \ the spring growth of wild onion." In fact Walker identifies her distance from this familiar territory through a trope of organicism. "I am no hothouse bulb to be reared in steam-heated flats \ with the music of El and subway in my ears." Geography for Walker is more than just the binarisms of rural and urban; it is the source of her conflict and alienation. As the poet faces homesickness for her south land, she is always conscious

of the historical price tag sewn into the "cotton fields, tobacco and the cane."

Perhaps Walker's most penetrating look at the southern landscape is in the long poem "Delta." It also reveals a burgeoning self-awareness, which Walker projects upon the "delta" folk, the inhabitants of an historically impoverished yet 'fertile crescent' of southwestern Mississippi, and signifies her radical consciousness-raising during the years in Chicago. Her letters to Richard Wright, written in the late thirties, offer a glimpse of the kind of activities that Walker immersed herself in at the time. She attended classes and lectures (at the worker's school) on "Dialectical Materialism," "Marxism-Leninism," "Art and Society," "The Proletarian Novel," and "Proletarian Poetry."²⁴ She promoted and enlisted subscriptions for the black radical literary journal, "Challenge," that Wright, Dorothy West, and others were editing on the east coast. She wrote a novel Goose Island,²⁵ about the shattered hopes of a talented female musician from Bronzeville. She was a poetry editor of and contributed fiction to Jack Conroy's refurbished "New Anvil," which he put out with Nelson Algren. Walker organized meetings for Spain at a local black church and was

²⁴

In a letter to Richard Wright dated 10/9/37, Walker excitedly remarks that a friend won a scholarship to the Worker's School and gave it to her. (Walker appears to have participated in the organizing of its "Writers and Artists" unit). The scholarship enabled the young poet, seeming to be constantly without means, to take two courses—"Fundamentals of Political Education," and "Political Economy." (Letter in the Richard Wright Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University).

²⁵

Although Walker mentions the novel in her book length conversation with Nikki Giovanni, Poetic Equation, as well as in her biography of Richard Wright, The Daemonic Genius of Richard Wright, I have not been able to locate a copy of it, and it has remained unpublished.

active in her WPA chapter union. Yet in her letters, she complains to Wright that her writing remained her top priority and that her organizational commitments would have to be sacrificed in order for her to complete her creative projects. Importantly, and more closely linked to her writing than attempts at activism, Walker occupied herself by reading the white male and largely European canon of socially conscious literature (Zola, Malraux, Gide, Gorki).²⁶ Yet one particular influence, which echoes throughout "Delta" is a famous statement from Marx and Engels' German Ideology: "Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life" (155).²⁷ In "Delta" Walker imagines the *homeland* reclaimed by those who created both its economic and historical significance. A people move "beyond your reach O mighty winnowing flail! \ infinite and free" through their ability to recognize themselves as historical agents.

While "Sorrow Home" possesses a resigned terseness, a South constructed through a history of racial oppression, its "Klan of hate," as well as its "hounds" and its "chain gangs," "Delta" represents Walker's attempt to denaturalize the desire for the South as 'home' through the left ideological perspectives she learned in Chicago. Yet, however important it is to reflect upon social being as mediated through material

²⁶ These authors are of course in addition to the white male classics of psychology, philosophy and science that I mention in the beginning of this chapter.

²⁷

It is doubtful that Walker and her fellow radicals in Chicago's left literary circles would have had access to this particular work, since it was not published until the early thirties and in Russian and German respectively at that. (The text first appeared in translation in America in 1947). The crude economic analyses of the American Marxists at that time suggest that they might have benefitted from the more epistemologically grounded early writings of Marx and Engels.

conditions, I am not entirely satisfied that the acknowledgement of class conflict and class consciousness equally explains the institutionalized racism endured by the people of the "Delta." The frustrations and desires of a people whose social being is so inextricably linked to both class and race antagonism requires a more complicated analysis. The Marxism that influenced Walker during her Chicago years with its European industrial origins and blindness towards gender concerns could hardly theorize the lot of most "delta" women, although some women benefitted from the Share Croppers' Unions that the Communist Party helped organize in Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana in the early thirties.²⁸ The question of race most certainly complicates an ideological framework structured to unite a working class consistently at odds with the contradictions of its own racial privileges in the case of white workers, or lack thereof, in the case of black workers. Moreover, the sexual division of labor that existed in northern working-class communities was radically different for black women of the delta; traditionally, women and men worked side by side in the fields -- a phenomenon that few white workers would experience or understand. Importantly, however, both black and white women shared the burden of the double shift, work in the fields or the factories, and work in the home.²⁹ Perhaps Margaret

²⁸

For a discussion of African American militant labor politics in the South see Robin D.G. Kelley, Hammer & Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression. His chapter on the Share Croppers' Union, in particular, discusses gendered aspects of working class life and struggle in the black South.

²⁹

Jacqueline Jones notes the important distinction between black and white female workers. Even as white women were disproportionately represented on the shop floor in comparison to white men, after their migration north, black women found most

Walker did not foresee the complicated relationships black workers in the south encountered through the narrowly conceived Marxist pedagogy at her disposal in Chicago; yet the poem "Delta" itself grounds such contradictions suprisingly well.

"Delta" conveys, through the lushness and of its language and its rhythmic verse cadences, a sorrowful history that makes the poet's problematized territorial desire for the South all the more powerful. The poem lovingly renders the south as a fertile, voluptuous body, while also portraying it as a tormented and enslaved body that has cultivated itself in its own chains. "Delta" is not only a travelogue told by one of its homesick exiles, but also a survey of the political economy told in verse by the offspring of its laborers. "Delta" constructs its South through the trajectory of birth, labor, and rising consciousness. This triad commences in the first person with the speaker *being* ("a child of the valley"), *watching* ("rivulets flow") and *listening* ("lullabies," "blues") and *thinking of convergence*: "If only from this valley we might rise with song! \ With singing that is ours." The poem's second section moves into the plural, the collective, the laboring body that defines itself through generations who moved in alienating similarity "in this low valley." That "[d]aily we fill boats with cargoes of our need \ and send them out to sea" is Walker's message, contained within the verdancy of the place, the richness of the soil: "We tend the crop and gather the harvest \ but not for ourselves to do we labor." Walker is resolute in representing estranged labor as it rests fitfully in its haunted valley:

factory jobs completely closed to them. Instead, most black women found work in laundries or as domestics in the homes of middle and upper class white women.

Out of a deep slumber truth rides upon us
and we wonder why we are helpless
and we wonder why we are dumb.

In the poem's third and final stanza, to keep with the language of the landscape, the earth, the "delta" as the poet describes it, Walker interjects the possibility of forces that will disrupt acquiescence and *naturalness*. Home, where the southern valleys quake with a desire for an insurrection of consciousness, begins with the sleep shattering questions of the above lines. Seasonal metaphors, eclipsing winters and regenerative springs are used as linguistic fortifications of a regional restructuring of consciousness. This is evidenced in the way Walker opens the section:

Now burst dams of years
and winter snows melt with an onrush of a turbulent
spring.
Now rises sap in slumbering elms
and floods overwhelm us
here in this low valley.

With the "years" of servility bursting and spring a "turbulent" rather than calming season, elms sapping and "floods" overwhelming the historically docile valley, the poet attempts to denaturalize the longing for home, which in actuality has been a place of degrading hardship, dehumanizing labor, and enforced poverty as well as ignorance. The valley is not just ripe for growing and harvesting but for "thundering" sounds that will disturb the thought process, with "cannons boom[ing] in our brains \ and there is a dawning understanding \ in the valleys of our spirits." Walker contrasts the valley's growing season with the awakening of those who make it grow, while the traditionally fertile crescent continues to be metaphorized as a site of intervention: "Into our troubled living flows the valley \ flooding our lives with a passion for

freedom." Importantly, as in "Sorrow Home" she plays linguistically with the idea of organicism. The reified bodies of those who have made and are thus the land must reclaim it: "We with our blood have watered these fields \ and they belong to us."

III. As I have articulated Walker's representation of the reified bodies of black labor and the black south in poems such as "We Have Been Believers" and "Delta," I would also like to explore Walker's interest in the performative body, and the performing cultural body of African American folk life. One exceedingly important creative source that must be examined is the folk tale. This largely southern folkloric practice, with its own brand of picaresque figures and distinct scenarios, is an idiom with which Walker worked closely during her years in Chicago. Her letters to Richard Wright indicate that she struggled to perfect a series of "folk tales;" however, since she gives no details about the particulars of these tales, I only assume that she is referring to the poems that appear in the second section of For My People. In these particular poems Walker rearticulates the legacies of familiar folklife characters. Her lyrics describe the exploits of tricksters, conjurers, gamblers, bootleggers, pimps, and laborers, accentuating the nuanced lives of African American folk heroes and heroines. Margaret Walker grew up in a household where the *word* was everything. Her maternal grandmother's storytelling no doubt introduced her to the rich and varied folk lore produced in the ante-bellum South that would resurface later in the pages of the novel Jubilee. Additionally, the African-American folk tale is an important literary form for Walker, the poet, to be working with in the 1930s. If For My

People challenges the "anglo-saxonnness" and class biases of high Modernism through its exploration of black consciousness and racial oppression, its appropriation of folk forms is central to this challenge.³⁰

In his engrossing study of black culture building in America, Black Culture and Black Consciousness, Lawrence Levine examines the development of the folk tale tradition from slavery times through and beyond the period of emancipation. In the twentieth century black communities throughout the United States were captivated by "supernatural tales, moral and didactic tales, human and animal trickster tales, tales centering on both real and apocryphal personal experiences...the entire range of tales that slaves had told and retold" (368). Storytelling, as *art* as well as *entertainment*, remained a significant source of cultural continuity. As Levine also points out, the folk heroes that surfaced after emancipation underwent a significant change from the narrow range of heroes represented in the ante-bellum period. "[N]ew figures appeared and old ones were frequently altered in aspect or significance...Neither the heroes nor the consciousness that molded them remained static in the century

30

Folklorist Roger D. Abrahams has commented upon how most African American folk tale collecting has been done by whites, with notable exceptions such as Zora Neale Hurston's Mules and Men. He does not explore, however, how African American poets such as Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, and Margaret Walker, writing at the same period in which much of the tale collecting occurred, were also responsible for disseminating much of these same folk materials. It is also important to note that Hughes, Brown and Walker challenge the modern poetry canon as it has evolved with work that questions the canon's emphasis on western "erudition" with the "folkways" important to black structures of feeling. (See Abraham's preface to Afro-American Folk Tales: Stories from Black Traditions in the New World. New York: Pantheon Books, 1985). See also Sterling A. Brown, Southern Road. Boston: Beacon Press, 1974, c1932, and Langston Hughes, The Weary Blues. New York: Knopf, 1926.

following emancipation" (369-70).

Walker retells ten folk lyrics, including two tales, "Bad Man Stagolee" and "Big John Henry," whose immense popularity (though as legends they are at odds with each other) have crossed over into "mainstream" American popular culture.³¹ I do not have the space here to explore all ten folk tales, but two tales, and Walker's particular telling of them, suggest important connections to Walker's raced, classed and gendered poetic articulations. With the poem "Bad-Man Stagolee," Walker reinscribes the Stagolee legend with a complicated twist coupling the policing of black communities with the hero's popularity. Then with "Kissie Lee" Walker rewrites the folk tale genre's androcentric bias, as well as the black community's identification of the trickster archetype as male, by answering the Stagolee story with the tale of a knife-wielding female tough.

As legend tells it, "Bad-Man Stagolee" (pronounced Stack'-a-lee, as Walker informs readers in a footnote) shot a man called Billy Lyons after loosing to him at cards (or craps). Date, place and stakes all vary, but in a blues version recorded by Mississippi John Hurt in 1929, "Stagolee shot Billy...[for] a five-dollar Stetson hat" (Marcus 76-77).³² Additionally, according to folk song collector Alan Lomax,

³¹

Lawrence Levine characterizes these two seminal figures respectively as "the bad man who transgressed totally all of the moral and legal bounds of society and the strong, self-contained hero who violated not the laws or the moral code but the stereotyped roles set aside for black people in a white society" (407). (see his Black Culture and Black Consciousness. New York: Oxford UP, 1975).

³²

A plethora of musical renditions of the legend exist from the country blues of performers like Hurt in the twenties to R & B performers like Lloyd Price in the

Stagolee is generally arrested for his crimes, executed in some fashion and sent down to hell.³³ Yet like the many renditions of the Stagolee tale that have circulated, Walker's version also differs. It contains a twist that refashions it for its contemporary urban audience.

That Stagolee was an all-right lad
Till he killed a cop and turned out bad,
Though some do say to this very day
He killed more'n one 'fore he killed that 'fay.

By transforming Stagolee into an "all-right lad" who kills a cop, Walker conflates a number of the versions of the tale into one that identifies Stagolee with violence as an everyday reality for African American communities throughout the nation. The cop, assumed to be white, suggests a fantasy of revenge for the police brutality that black communities have historically had visited upon them.³⁴ Stagolee, though remaining

fifties. Even white performers such as Johnny Cash sang about "Staggerlee," as he was also called, in addition to Stack-a-lee, after its *proper* pronunciation, and Stacker Lee. In the early nineteen eighties a white, British punk band, The Clash, opened a reggae inspired tune, "Wrong-em Boyo" with the Staggerlee legend. Rock music's indebtedness to black cultural tropes no doubt found inspiration for its own bad boy, outlaw images with the Stagolee legend. (For a discussion of the Stagolee tale and its connections to American popular music see Greil Marcus's Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock'n'Roll Music, New York: Dutton, 1976).

33

Lomax's interest in the Stagolee story focuses upon its use in the blues music idiom, which appropriated ante-bellum material and adapted it to this musical genre as it developed in the post slavery period. (See his The Land Where the Blues Began, New York: Delta Books, 1993).

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Perhaps the resituated Stagolee was inspired by *real* events happening in Chicago at the time Walker appears to have worked on the tales. While helping Richard Wright reconstruct the events of the Nixon case (a young black man on trial for murder) on which much of Native Son was based, in a letter that included clippings on the trial from the local papers, she comments on the state of affairs between Chicago's black

the stuff of legends, and fashioned with irony in the poem, is also for Walker a resituated metaphor for what social ills create. Walker's Stagolee contains the same invincible curiosity that all the previous tellers have given him, and she informs us "the tale ain't new," but she stretches the legend from its celebration of Stagolee as mean individualist, to a tale with political undertones. In Walker's telling, Stagolee, after his "bullets made holes no doc could cyo," is able to disappear without being apprehended, eluding the racist taunts and torments which then lead to lynching:

But the funniest thing about that job
Was he never got caught by no mob
And he missed the lynching meant for his hide
'Cause nobody knows how Stagolee died

To highlight Walker's retelling as seemingly political, one must see that the Stagolee story maintained its importance in the black community through its radical symbolism. The myth presents a man whose outlandish and wholly autonomous antics signify the ultimate in freedom in a nation in which that freedom has been most brutally curtailed. Walker's reinterpretation of Stagolee's transgressions further inscribes the story with a hegemonical challenge. Stagolee doesn't just kill a fellow hood, a

community and the police department.

You may not know all the brutal attacks of the Chicago Police since last memorial day. Police history in Chicago since that time has been one succession of brutality and intimidation after another. The Maxwell Street Station has become famous for getting confessions by the third degree method and today one Negro boy is permanently paralyzed because of the police doings. These rape cases appear annually about this time to increase circulation and I know personally that 56 Negro boys were picked up on the North side in connection with a murder last fall committed by the woman's sweetheart. (letter dated June 6 [1938], Richard Wright Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University).

compatriot gambler, as he does in other versions of the tale, he kills a cop. He messes with authority; he messes with white America, and he gets away with it. This is how he becomes a legend.

Bad-Man Stagolee ain't no more
 But his ghost still walks up and down the shore
 Of Old Man River round New Orleans
 With her gumbo, rice, and good red beans!

Yet the problems in politicizing the Stagolee tale need also be addressed. The legend, apparently built around the careers of two actual turn-of-the century criminals Morris Slater and Railroad Bill,³⁵ is not, according to Lawrence Levine's reading, one that lends itself to romanticization or sentimentalizing. Though Walker's rendition celebrates Stagolee's elusiveness in the face of white authority, he is not Robin Hood nor even Pretty Boy Floyd; his actions never lead to any acts of genuine good will within the black community, and the tellers of the tale seem to have been generally conscious of this fact. As Levine maintains, "[these folk heroes] were not given any socially redeeming characteristics simply because in them there was no hope of social redemption" (419). Importantly, to romanticize folk legends such as Stagolee would be to play with the important dose of reality that Walker, under the tutelage of Wrightian Naturalism, perhaps wanted to convey with stories about the more sordid figures of African American folk life, thus reminding her Depression audience of the complicated nature of *literary* representation.

³⁵ For discussion of these two figures see Levine as well as John W. Roberts, From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1989.

If "Bad-Man Stagolee" is a tale known far and wide, whose influence has even crossed over into mainstream popular culture, Walker's tale of the female tough "Kissie Lee" recollects a folk hero from the margins. Yet mainstream popular culture, while it is able to not only tolerate but idolize a "bad man" like Stagolee, is apparently not ready to meet his female counterpart in the ballad Walker tells of this good girl turned bad.

Toughest gal I ever did see
Was a gal by the name of Kissie Lee;
The toughest gal God ever made
And she drew a dirty, wicked blade.

As in "Bad-Man Stagolee" violence in "Kissie Lee" is treated matter-of-factly. Importantly, the violence depicted (but not demonized) in these tales is always connected in larger terms to the complex structures of powerlessness found in the communities of their tellers. However, where Walker depicts Stagolee's end in slippery terms as a conscious effort to problematize his legendary import, Kissie Lee lives a life of violence and dies violently as any "bad man" might.

She could shoot glass offa the hinges,
She could take herself on the wildest binges.
And she died with her boots on switching blades
On Talladega Mountain in the likker raids.

Perhaps what is most striking is that like the woman of another tale Walker retells "Yalluh Hammah," in which a female trickster outsmarts a guy who likes to "lay his jive," Kissie Lee's story is about the fierce independence of the female folk hero in a tradition in which the "mens" seem to get all the attention. As with the poem I cited in the beginning of this chapter, "Lineage," Walker takes the unsung strength of

African American women and provides a space for their recognition inside a literary genre and cultural context in which questions of black women's oppression remained as yet unarticulated. Rather than creating a separate text in which the voices of black women emerge, she acknowledges their labor alongside the men, as well as their legendary transgressions in the case of Kissie Lee, as part of a total dialogue on black structures of feeling that she has attempted to record in For My People.

If black folk tale culture is decidedly masculine in outlook, (and the significance of maintaining masculine heroes such as Staggolee and John Henry has been traditionally important in resisting a white racist culture determined if not to destroy at least to stereotype black men through emasculation), the emergence of a folk figure such as Kissie Lee challenges the existing framework in which the "bad" male folk heroes appear representative.³⁶ According to Walker's telling, Kissie Lee's abuse at the hands of "a no good shine" is what shapes her character as "the toughest gal God ever made." What is equally striking about Walker's interest in this tale is that like the poem "Lineage," Kissie Lee's turn from victim to agent appears part of a

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As I suggest later in the chapter, since folk tales told about women seem to overwhelmingly detail domestic issues and romantic problems, it has been difficult to locate a possible source for "Kissie Lee." However, Lawrence Levine cites a fragment sent to Alan Lomax from a woman named Willie George King of Louisiana. This fragment is interesting not only because of its articulation of female agency, but it contains elements of prowess associated with the hyper-masculinized rock and roll music inspired by black performers such as Bo Diddley:

There is nothing in the jungle is any badder than me.
I am the baddest woman ever come out Tenisee;
I sleep with a panther till the break of day;
I caught a tiger-cat in the collar and I ask him what he had to say;
And I wore a rattlesnake for my chain,
And a Negro man for my fob,... (402).

dynamic process controlled by women. Kissie Lee is not the first in line of bad girl heroes. Her "Grammaw," tired of Kissie's "whinin," offers the insight that "[People don't ever treat you right," and urges her to do as she has done:

"Whin I was a gal wasn't no soul
 Could do me wrong an' still stay whole.
 Ah got me a razor to talk for me
 An' aftah that they let me be."

Not only does Kissie, within the ironic boundaries of the bad folk hero convention, receive advice through a matrilineal history, but such a historical line suggests the "badness" of women as a form of self-preservation and pursuit of female agency en suite. Kissie Lee, taking her grandmother's advice takes this malfeasance a step further: "'Cause when she learned to stab and run \ She got herself a little gun." As Kissie graduates from mean gal to "[m]eanest mama you ever seen," she also (in keeping with the super-power suggestions of the bad man folk legends) loses her status as victim, attains the status of "woman," while at the same time appears to maintain an independence which collapses both stated regions as sites of negotiation: "She could hold her likker and hold her man \ And she sent thoo life jus' raisin san.'"

The climax of the tale is Kissie's revenge on a man who "done her dirt long time ago\ [w]hen she was good and feeling low." Not only does Kissie shoot him "to the floor," but to reveal the determination of her vengeful spirit, she flashes her blade so that "[e]vvy livin' guy got out of her way." Walker tells us that Kissie dies "with her boots on switching blades." As with the other tales, we are given no moral; such is inconceivable in a community which cannot realistically hope that its acts of revenge will not provoke even graver retaliations. Thus as much as Kissie's story

invokes female agency, it is not a tale of uplift for black women. Just as judgement on the activity of the men is reserved, so is such judgement reserved for the equally bad women. Importantly, Walker creates with "Kissie Lee" a presence for black women as tricksters and evil doers as much she creates a presence for those women (and men) who dared tell their stories.³⁷

"Kissie Lee" as transgressor tale bears relation to another important African American aesthetic genre that Walker would have been aware of as she worked on these tales. Blues music, which as I have noted made much use of African American folk tales, was also a cultural phenomenon in which women not only participated but greatly enriched. As I have maintained the difficulty in locating sources on female folk heroes (particularly those of the "bad" variety), both Hazel Carby and Angela Davis have lamented the scant scholarship in the area of "women's blues."³⁸

The predominant themes in women's blues are related to romantic and

³⁷ Another interesting "womens'" text is "Molly Means," about a conjure woman. The conjurer tale has, however, received more critical attention, so I have chosen to reserve my space for the female outlaw whose exploits, for the most part, have been overlooked.

³⁸

Zora Neale Hurston's collection Of Mules and Men (1935) contains prose narratives in which women's exploits are at the center. One tale does celebrate a female tough named "Ella Wall," but her "legend" appears to be filtered through the lyrics of masculine desire: "If you want good boody / [o]h, go to Ella Wall" (146). In this tale Hurston describes Ella pulling a blade inside a gambling house. For a discussion of women's blues see Hazel Carby, "It Jus' Bes that Way Sometimes" Feminisms. Ed. R. Warhol. 2nd ed. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1997; Angela Y. Davis "I Used to Be Your Sweet Mama." Sexy Bodies: The Strange Carnalities of Feminism. Eds. Elizabeth Grosz and Elspeth Probyn. London: Routledge, 1995. Davis cites as "trail-blazing," Daphne Duval Harrison's study, Black Pearls: The Blues Queens of the 1920s (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1988). Harrison's text is the first full length study of women blues performers.

domestic preoccupations and therefore seem miles away from the independent individualism portrayed in "Kissie Lee." Yet Angela Davis contends in her essay, "I Used to Be Your Sweet Mama," that the romantic and domestic attitudes represented in the blues of pioneers such as Bessie Smith and Gertrude "Ma" Rainey complicate "the prevailing idealization of romantic love in the dominant culture" (237). Blues music, like the transformed African American folklore genre, is a phenomenon of post-bellum freedom, and celebrates that freedom to the extreme. The ability to work, love and travel where and how one pleased for the first time in the history of black America became the signifying trope of the blues genre. The rough antics Walker describes in "Kissie Lee" are decidedly kin to this exploration of freedom. In many ways Kissie's tale is the reverse of the disheartening tunes of betrayal and abuse that Davis examines in her reading of women's blues. Yet Davis also points to the complex sexual awareness of Smith and Rainey's music. In fact their frank knowledge and exploration of sexuality and domestic violence are some of the first glimpses we have of the cycle of abuse that women have had historically visited upon them. Importantly, as I previously suggest, Kissie Lee becomes the hero she is because she avenges her own (implied) physical abuse at the hands of a "no good shine." As Davis remarks, and I feel it has some relevance to Walker's reconstruction of "Kissie Lee:"

What is most significant about women's blues as they suggest emergent feminist insurgency is that they unabashedly name the problem of male violence, ushering it out of the shadows of domestic life behind which society dictated it be hidden (251).

The blues lovingly given to us by Smith and Rainey "allude to rejection,

abuse, desertion and unfaithful lovers," but they also persistently explore "independence... assertiveness, indeed defiance..." (245). "Kissie Lee," though not a tale that directly confronts sexuality or domestic disharmony -- the predominant tropes of women's blues -- embraces the celebration of a precarious freedom and places "independence," "assertiveness," and "defiance" above all else.

IV. While "Kissie Lee" remains a tale of black female agency, even if from the social margins, Walker leaves her readers with a less sanguine view of black working-class female subjectivity in the poem "Whores," which is part of sonnet sequence that closes For My People. Whether intentional or coincidental, "Whores," represents a closing commentary on black women that is rather different from the representations found in the text's first and second sections. If "Lineage" characterizes black women's contributions to labor history as thematized in the first section of For My People, and with "Kissie Lee," in the second section, entertains readers with the legendary power of the "bad" female folk hero, "Whores" suggests black women's powerlessness as it depicts "real," not mythical, female transgressors.

When I grew up I went away to work
 where painted whores were fascinating sights.
 They came on like whole armies through the nights --
 their sullen eyes on mine, their mouths a smirk,
 and from their hands keys hung suggestively.
 Old women working by an age-old plan
 to make their bread in ways as best they can
 would hobble past and beckon tirelessly.

Perhaps one day they'll all die in the streets
 or be surprised by bombs in each wide bed;
 learning too late in unaccustomed dread

that easy ways, like whores on special beats,
no longer have the gift to harbor pride
or bring men peace, or leave them satisfied.

This poem, by a young black woman, is full of contradictions, and its form is important too. Walker deconstructs the sonnet as it is conventionally associated with the romance tradition by writing about black working-class women's sex work. Walker reappropriates the Shakespearian sonnet's intention to assess and praise the attributes of the figure (most notably a lover) to be exalted, by describing sympathetically in the opening octet, and then more judgementally in the closing sestet, the woman made spectacle by the degrading and exhausting machinations of her trade.

Before analyzing the sonnet at greater length, it is important to look at the historical context that informed the poem's creation. Walker's inspiration for "Whores" came from her work on a WPA sponsored recreation program for which she volunteered during her senior year at Northwestern. As Walker explained to poet Nikki Giovanni many years later:

They gave me a group of so-called delinquent girls to pal around with in order to see what kind of influence a person with my background and training would have on them. They were shoplifters, prostitutes, and who knows what else? It wasn't a time when you had a widespread problem with drugs, so the two main problems were shoplifting and prostitution. Division Street was the street for prostitutes...They walked Division Street and...*jangled their keys* (90).

Walker also emphasizes that her southern, "more provincial" background created a curiosity in her as she began to observe prostitute life in Chicago. "That's when I learned that prostitution and gambling were vices tied up with city politics" (90). She

also implicates her employers. "One of the straw bosses on the project was a man who was a pimp; his brother was a smuggler dealing in narcotics and everything" (90).³⁹

Horace Cayton and St. Clair Drake discuss prostitution in Chicago's Bronzeville as the young Margaret Walker might have seen it. During this period the district's

"reputation as a vice area was reinforced by the prevalence of street-walkers in certain

areas" (596).⁴⁰ The opinions of social workers and policemen concurred. Race

discrimination made the women of Bronzeville more obvious targets for arrest. While

young girls without opportunity became more susceptible to the "trade," black women

who were not prostitutes were picked up because of their close proximity to it.⁴¹

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Not only did Walker's experience with the young prostitutes inspire her to write "Whores," but it also gave her background, and later a stipend, to start work on the unpublished novel Goose Island. The novel deals with a talented, promising young woman who eventually ends up a Division Street Prostitute. It gets its title from the Italian and black neighborhood in which Walker worked with the young "delinquents." *n.b.* Walker has also noted in several different places that her "black" American Tragedy, Goose Island, prefigures Richard Wright's Native Son.

40

Kevin Mumford suggests the importance of "interzones" -- black/white sex districts in Chicago and New York in the early Twentieth Century. He connects them to a variety of sex and gender issues, including prostitution as part of the social impact of the Great Migration. He discusses racial difference within "commercialized sex" as he refers to it, but these "interzones" were greatly changed by the Depression. Cayton and Drake examine prostitution as it was affected by economic changes brought to Chicago's black belt once the Depression hit.

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Cayton and Drake make the following observation about prostitution in Black Metropolis: "During the Depression years the boldness of [prostitutes'] solicitations drew bitter comments from lower-class women who were trying to maintain stable relations with their men or 'raise children right.' Thus one lower-class housewife, when asked about the building in which she lived, replied: "Honey, this place is full of whores. They are the cheapest, nastiest set in Chicago. If I could get me another place I wouldn't be here" (596).

A closer analysis of the poem reveals its contradictions. It maintains a sharp distance from its subject, no doubt connected to Walker's southern, middle-class, educated perceptions of the northern urban prostitute. Her religious upbringing perhaps instilled in her a sense of judgement about the uses of sexuality. Considering Walker's introduction to Marxist political economy and other radical philosophical trends during her Chicago years, this poem does not, compared to other poems I have discussed, state as strongly its author's understanding of African-American economic disenfranchisement. The poem is more a pitying response to black women's transgressions than it is to their underemployment due to race and gender prejudice in the North, and inextricably linked with their decisions to work as prostitutes.⁴² Like a number of the other sonnets in this final section, "Whores" is constructed as a memory. Not only are these prostitutes removed from the poet because of differences in lifestyle and opportunity, but they are described from a historical distance -- a past memory. Though I read the poem's speaker as the poet herself, interesting ambiguities arise in the speaker's voice. The poet's naivety makes these women "fascinating sights;" she is encountering the northern prostitute for the first time, and her work on the recreation project requires her to learn a little bit about where these women are coming from. Yet the gaze she constructs in this poem, also suggests the

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For example as Kevin Mumford notes: "Racism in the market -- black women's relegation to domestic service, their vulnerability to sexual harassment, and segregated service in brothels -- combined to increase the probability that African-American women would enter prostitution." He adds that "[a]t the same time racism operated within the markets of commercialized sex, forcing women of color to negotiate yet another set of racial stigmas and hierarchies" (96).

male gaze the prostitute receives as she presents her wares in the marketplace. "Their sullen eyes on mine" with their "keys hung suggestively" describe them the way they are seen by their potential purchasers -- men whose race and class are unknown to us. The poem's disengaged tone suggests more than one possible speaking voice; however, let us imagine the young, college educated Walker as speaker, acknowledging herself in the beginning as going away "to work" and beginning to see the world. Importantly, the poet's "work" is the intellectual work that brought her North. It provides an interesting contrast to the belittling sex "work" performed by the Division Street prostitutes. These women are removed from the speaker by age and class: "Old women working by an age old plan / to make their bread in ways as best they can." Although Walker describes the women as "fascinating sights," there is fear and disdain behind this suggestion. After all, the poet's work with young delinquent girls who have, among other things, been picked up for prostitution, prepares her to see "whores" through the eyes of a *reformer*. She represents, ironically in the midst of Depression, the world of *real* "work," social work.

The poem's closing sestet is more ambiguous and judgmental in tone. Walker imagines her subjects dead "in the streets" or "surprised by bombs," which suggests a call for their destruction. To rearticulate an important point, in the poems previously discussed in this chapter, Walker explores the complicated relations of her subjects to the social praxis inscribing them, this particular poem rather dispassionately observes the labor of black women without spending much energy on the alienated confines in which they have been scripted. However, the reference to "whores on special beats"

suggests an important dichotomy of prostitute life, the body that is negotiated between the police and the pimp. Walker reflects upon the complicated relationship between prostitution and the economic and social surveillance of black women by connecting the illegal trade of prostitution with the law itself. The police, those other *beat walkers*, become "whores on special beats;" thus Walker alludes to police involvement in the city's underworld activities, in which these women and their pimps are also intimately linked.⁴³ These "special beats" also suggest the prostitute working the turf controlled by her pimp. She does not control her own means of employment (and production), her body. Whether on the police or pimp's "special beats," these women "no longer have the gift to harbor pride \ or bring men peace." These final lines, while in the traditional sonnet are executed to suggest a resolution about love, negate such a possibility: the traffic in (black) working class women continues; black intellectual workers like Walker can only observe.

If "Whores" settles upon a bleakness of experience symbolized through the prostitute and her marks upon the pavement, two poems that close For My People suggest a kind of dialectic between resignation and struggle that is also signified in the text as a whole. "Our Need" and "The Struggle Staggers Us" are sonnets of hope, even as they embrace the dismal reality of a world moved out of Depression into war.

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Kevin Mumford also maintains that historical data suggests the existence of racial bias in the policing of prostitutes. "[B]lack women were easy prey to police, who possibly were under pressure to inflate the number of arrests. Black prostitutes were more likely to be convicted and, after conviction, more likely to receive maximum sentences. After serving their sentences, black prostitutes were less successful on probation than were white women and more likely than white women to return to prostitution. Indeed, their rates of recidivism were higher" (94).

In "Our Need," Walker hopes for "a wholeness born of inner strength," and "the friendly feel of human forms." Thus the humanity stripped from "Whores" returns even if, as she laments in the title of the collection's final poem, "the struggle staggers us." As I have maintained throughout this chapter, For My People is a book about struggle. Importantly, given the larger social questions that Walker's years in Chicago provided her with, the struggle she acknowledges may be collective, but it is also one of daily survival and the personal, ordinary claims that inscribe the "struggle between the morning and the night." This need and this struggle that Walker hopes to see fashioned into a "journey from the me to you" and a "journey from the you to me," in fact anticipates the conscious rumblings of the civil rights era. It is rather significant that For My People appears in 1942, three years before what Cornel West has characterized as the end of European dominance (1492-1945). All in all it is a text that named and claimed a history and a "movement" for African American struggle, before a large-scale agenda had been inaugurated. Of further importance is the fact that For My People is not followed by another book of poems by its author until the mid-sixties. It seems that Margaret Walker's writing ground, her place to articulate the aesthetics of race and class, not to mention her interest in rearticulating the tropes of psychology, religion, and science that I mention at the opening of this chapter, are to be once again inspired by what was happening in the streets of America's cities (like Chicago) in the 1960s.

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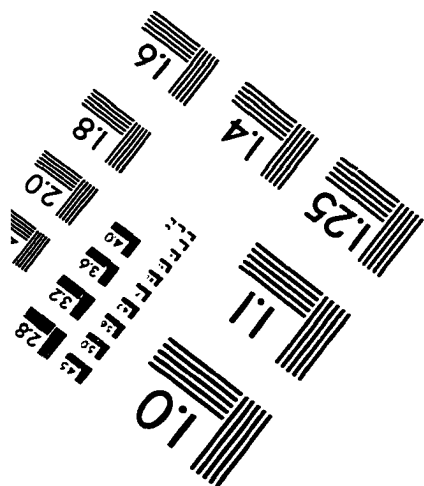
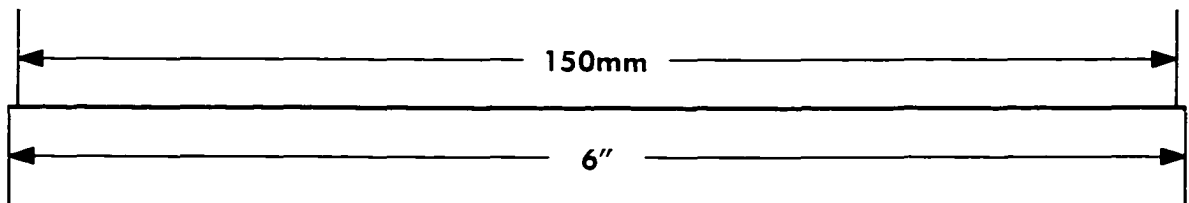
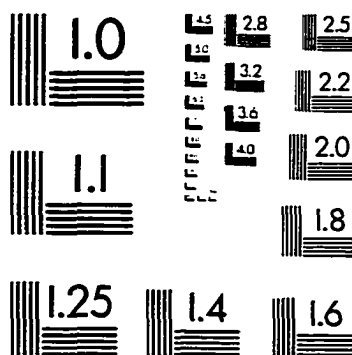
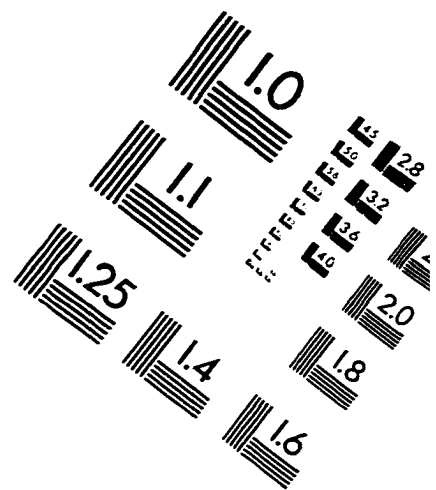
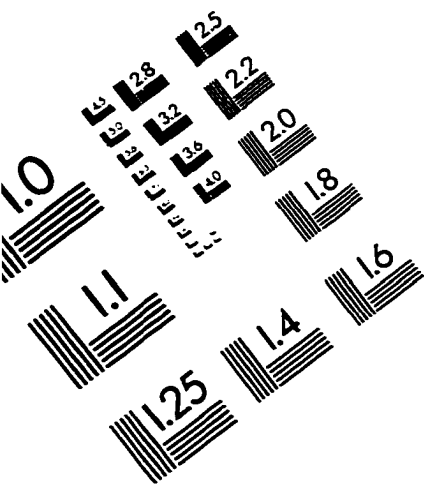
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