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Mary Rebecca Reynolds

Yale University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, ukmaryreynolds@gmail.com

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Abstract

Red Lives: Grassroots Radicalism and Visionary Organizing in the American Century

Mary Rebecca Reynolds

2021

“Red Lives” is a side-by-side social and intellectual biography of Claudia Jones, Emma Tenayuca, and Ah Quon McElrath, three working-class women who came-of-age during the Great Depression, and whose lifelong commitments to grassroots organizing and radical politics emerged from the Popular Front’s cross-class, multiracial coalitions and collective actions. All three joined the Communist Party as young adults and first organized for groups representing youth, the unemployed, or workers, often on campaigns for race and gender equity, civil liberties, and democratic rights, in New York, Texas, and Hawai’i. They produced and published theoretical work that elaborated the underpinnings of their organizing strategies, and offered radical analyses—with race, gender, and class at the core—of capitalism, democracy, and social movements. Extending the Popular Front’s organizing models and theories for decades, they championed communist-inflected, anti-racist, and feminist politics until the end of their lives.

Telling these women’s stories illuminates the unbroken history of both reactionary opposition to radical, multiracial, working-class women’s activism and that activism’s perseverance and influence throughout twentieth-century America. It makes four key interventions in the scholarship on twentieth century social movements. First, it insists on the centrality of anti-racist and feminist organizing to Depression- and World War II-era Popular Front politics and organizations. Second, it challenges common chronologies of American communism’s rise and fall by highlighting the continuance of radical organizing in the face of anticommunism, white supremacy, and the rise of Cold War liberalism. Third, it demonstrates Popular Front communist organizers’ legacies in the civil rights and women’s movements from

the 1950s to the 1980s. Fourth, it provides an analysis of radicalism's ongoing historical erasure by both liberal and right wing anticommunists.

Offering detailed narratives of the left-affiliated movements and diverse political theories that formed these women's times and careers, "Red Lives" presents fresh evidence of a grassroots American radicalism—Popular Frontism—far more influential, lasting, and independent from the control of either Soviet or American Communist Party leaders than previously recognized. Jones, Tenayuca, and McElrath embody ideals of the Popular Front and American communism, and those ideals' under-recognized longevity as a constant strain in left politics from the 1930s into the twenty-first century.

For these women, Popular Frontism's principles included: support for a multiracial American national identity and historical narratives highlighting how organizing work by people of color, immigrants, and radicals shaped the nation; insistence that political and labor movements be grassroots and rank-and-file led, as well as deeply embedded in the needs of local communities and working-class families; and adherence to a revolutionary politics based in multiracial and cross-class campaigns for race, gender, and economic justice, simultaneously. Building on recent work that highlights the long civil rights and women's movements and the survival of radical organizing in postwar politics, this dissertation illustrates the centrality of anti-racist and feminist organizing to pre-Cold War labor and civil rights organizations fighting for economic justice, then demonstrates the Popular Front organizers' legacies in the civil rights and women's movements in the later twentieth century.

Establishing the endurance of Popular Frontism also permits a clearer awareness of the continuous and intimate forms of anticommunism throughout the century. This awareness disturbs the still common perception of McCarthyism as an exceptional phenomenon in

American political life, and illuminates the deep ideological inextricability between anticommunism and white supremacy.

Documenting the range of on-the-ground organizing strategies in which these women engaged to convince working people to take part in labor strikes, mass demonstrations, and electoral politics, this dissertation details the challenges they faced in building sustainable careers and economic security from these efforts. In an example of working-class intellectual history, it analyzes their political theories and writings to demonstrate their commitment to anti-racist, feminist, and class-based politics from the 1930s onward. The work draws on oral histories, personal letters, manuscript writings, newspapers, government records, and published work from archives in Texas, New York, Hawai'i, and London, as well as various secondary scholarly and biographical accounts.

Placed alongside one another in this framework, these Popular Fronters' separate stories offer a window into day-to-day organizing labor in modern social movements, as well as the divisions, debates, and dissent among and between national leaders and grassroots organizers engaged in building labor, civil rights, and economic justice movements. The grassroots radicalism and organizing strategies that Jones, Tenayuca, and McElrath practiced offer a record and road map of opportunities and pitfalls in creating the coalitions, campaigns, and political theory necessary for a more just world.

Red Lives:
Grassroots Radicalism and Visionary Organizing in the American Century

A Dissertation
Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of
Yale University
in the Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

By
Mary Rebecca Reynolds

Dissertation Director: Michael Denning

June 2021

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....vi

Introduction.....1

PART 1:
The Making of American Popular Front Communists in the 1930s and 1940s

Chapter One:
“Young people are making their voices heard”: Claudia Jones and the Youth Movement in Harlem.....54

Chapter Two:
“We went through battles here”: Emma Tenayuca and the Unemployed Movement in San Antonio.....105

Chapter Three:
“We were the pre-feminists”: Ah Quon McElrath and the Labor Movement in Honolulu.....153

PART 2:
Popular Front Legacies from the 1940s to the end of the American Century

Chapter Four:
“Women must fight for their own liberation”: Claudia Jones’s Journalism and Grassroots Organizing in Transnational Civil Rights and Anti-Colonialism Movements.....201

Chapter Five:
“I had a vision”: Legacies and Erasures of Emma Tenayuca’s Popular Front Organizing.....251

Chapter Six:
“Organize everyone you can get your hands on”: Ah Quon McElrath’s Career in Social Work and Labor-Community-Political Organizing.....299

Afterword.....351

Bibliography.....361

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The path that brought me to these words of appreciation was long, but numerous organizing comrades, teachers, colleagues, friends, and family helped me navigate its unexpected detours and surprising curves.

I began thinking about the project in 2003 when I was a Teaching Assistant in Yale's American Studies Department and the elected Chair of my union, the Graduate Employees and Students Organization (GESO). The intervening years took me from strikes at Yale, Columbia, and New York University, to union elections in Philadelphia and Vancouver, to contract negotiations in Fresno and Toronto, to political campaigns back home in New Haven, to new adventures in York, England, and now to completing the dissertation while under a months-long COVID-19 lockdown in Berlin, Germany.

First, thank you to everyone with whom I walked a picket line, got arrested in a civil disobedience, knocked on doors for political candidates, marched in demonstrations for good jobs, argued about strategy, cried when we lost, and celebrated when we won. You all made my life more meaningful, our employers more responsive to working people, and our communities more powerful. Members of GESO and UNITE HERE's Local 34 and Local 35 deserve special mention: Jeffrey Boyd, Brenda Choresi Carter, Amanda Ciafone, Dan Gilbert, Sarah Egan, Sarah Haley, David Huyssen, Mandi Isaacs Jackson, Marcy Kaufman, Melissa Mason, Michael Mullins, Pam O'Donnell, Ariana Paulson, Bob Proto, Shana Redmond, Lindsay Rogers, Annemarie Strassel, Ken Suzuki, Wendi Walsh, Kirsten Weld, John Wilhelm, and Brian Wingate. Beginning in my first days in New Haven, Brenda and Mandi in particular have shared

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Fairfield University professors Cecelia Bucki and Liz Hohl nurtured my interest in labor and women's history. Liz encouraged me to apply to her alma mater, the Women's History Graduate Program at Sarah Lawrence. There, Mary Porter, Shanaz Rouse, and Lyde Sizer inspired me to think in a more interdisciplinary way. My fellow Women's History students—including Rachelle Sussman, Rona Holub, Staci Dixon, and Sarah Dowdy Traugott—provided me with sustaining conversations and camaraderie, on and off campus.

My most important relationship in the Women's History Program, however, did not begin in a classroom. In 1997, when Priscilla Murolo took over as the program's Director, she hired me—MA degree in hand—as a part-time Department Assistant. She fought for and obtained resources to promote me to a newly created full-time Assistant Director job. She pushed me to apply to doctoral programs, and continued to counsel me after I left Sarah Lawrence for Yale. Several years later, just after I withdrew from graduate school to take a full-time union organizing job, she hired me again to teach a yearlong graduate course in her stead while she was on leave. The joy of teaching women's and labor history that year helped to keep me tethered to this dissertation for over a decade afterward, while also allowing me to pay off a significant chunk of my student loan debt. Priscilla read drafts of these chapters, giving me insightful comments, helpful suggestions, and a gentle nudge to finish. She has been my biggest champion for nearly half my life. For my money—to use a Muroloism—she is the best teacher, ally, and friend that anyone could have.

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In May 2006, using funds from Yale’s John F. Enders Fellowship, I travelled to Honolulu to interview Ah Quon McElrath, who was then ninety years old and as active as ever. She died in 2008; I regret that I cannot now send her these pages to properly express my gratitude to her, both for those few days of conversation and for her lifetime of organizing. (Also, thanks to Mandi for lending me her digital recorder for the interviews in pre-iPhone times, and to Nina Bernstein for later facilitating the digitization of those recordings after their technology had become obsolete). Robert Perkinson and Kieko Matteson warmly welcomed me to Honolulu, and helped me find a place to stay.

Later that same summer, I discovered an unexpected family connection between my partner, David, and Emma Tenayuca. During a visit to meet David's grandparents, Lester and Mimi Bernstein (née Lipscomb), I told Mimi—who had grown up in San Antonio—about my dissertation project, mentioning Tenayuca. She gasped and said, “I knew Emma!” Unbeknownst to David, his great-grandfather, a lawyer, had represented Tenayuca pro bono after one of her arrests in the 1930s. Years later, I confirmed Mimi's memories when I came across a newspaper article listing her father, Pen Lipscomb, as Tenayuca's attorney. Mimi and Lester died in 2014, but their warm support of this work outlives them.

After moving to the U.K. in 2015, family visits to the U.S. provided opportunities for several research excursions. My parents and David's—Geramy Noone, Bob Noone, Nina Bernstein and Andreas Huysen—contributed in numerous ways to the success of these expeditions. Both couples provided a home base with lots of books and toys to keep their grandson occupied, ensuring that I had time to research. My siblings and siblings-in-law—Jessica and John Handrik, Robert and Kym Noone, and Daniel Huysen—competed in too many games of cornhole to count in Connecticut, and cooked us delicious meals in Vermont and New York. More recently, my mom and sister have kept up my spirits on weekly Zoom calls, where we discuss books and films about women's history and politics, and laugh at Jessica's bad puns.

In the summer of 2018, I embarked on a multi-city research trip in Texas, Tenayuca's home state. Gathering material at archives in San Antonio, Arlington, Austin, and Denton in just five days was only possible with David driving the rental car, and the institutions' generous policies on digital photography. (Even more crucial was leaving our son with his grandparents for the week.) Before the journey, my mother-in-law put me in touch with Jan Jarboe Russell, a San Antonio-based journalist who had known Tenayuca well. Jan and her husband opened their

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As I complete the final edits of *Red Lives* under another COVID lockdown almost a year later, Ben, now twelve, is in another room doing "*zu Hause Unterricht*" for his Berlin *Gymnasium*, while David writes his book in another. Ben's affection and encouragement ("C'mon, Mama, you can do it!") inspires me daily to finish in the hopes that he will see these stories in print, one day.

My deepest appreciation is reserved for David, who has read and commented on multiple chapter drafts over the years. Our conversations about history, politics, organizing, and writing

shaped the ideas in this dissertation, sharpening my analysis and amplifying my voice. His confidence in these stories' worth and significance has seen me through the arduous process of writing, and his commitment to an equal division of domestic and parental labor gave me the time to do them justice. I have dedicated this work to my mom and sister, but David's devotion to "Red Lives"—including mine—is on every page.

For my mother, and my sister

INTRODUCTION

Claudia Jones was an “Alien Red.” Emma Tenayuca, a “Red Chief.” Ah Quon McElrath did “Red Work.”¹ From the 1930s through the 1950s, these working-class women had their “Red” epithets plastered over newspaper and magazine pages across the country, and even the world. They were once among the most well known communists in America, and as young women during the Great Depression and post-World War II eras cultivated similar political theories and organizing models.

Jones, Tenayuca, and McElrath joined the Communist Party of America (CPUSA) in the mid-1930s, but they cut their organizing teeth in the Popular Front’s youth, unemployed, and labor organizations, while fighting for race and gender equity, civil liberties, and democratic rights. Their grassroots radicalism and organizing strategies, honed in these communist-influenced social movements, led to significant victories for working people in their multiracial communities and workplaces, as well as tensions and turbulence in their professional and personal lives.

Although there is no evidence that they ever met, and they organized in cities separated by thousands of miles—New York/London, San Antonio, and Honolulu, respectively—these women shared a lifelong commitment to what “Red Lives” defines as Popular Frontism. This political theory and model of organizing puts working-class women of color at the center of anti-racist, feminist, and class-based struggles for justice and equality during the American century.

¹ “Seek to Deport Woman Author as Alien Red,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 21, 1948; “Emma Tenayuca is Red Chief,” *Houston Chronicle*, May 28, 1938; William Ewing, “Hawaii Civil Liberties Committee Called Communist; Aimed to do ‘Red’ Work,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, July 11, 1950.

Anticommunist repression and conflicts about strategy and priorities in radical, civil rights, and labor movement organizations (especially but not exclusively during the Cold War) caused them to reimagine their careers over the course of their lifetimes. State agencies and national media alike painted these women from immigrant or non-white families as foreign subversives and threats to American democracy. By the mid-1950s, anticommunism and white supremacy had forced both Jones and Tenayuca into exile, and McElrath to give up a government job. All three had dropped out of local and national headlines in an apparent silencing of their radical voices.

Exile or blacklisting interrupted and redirected their volunteer organizing and career trajectories, but they remained committed to participating, when possible, in the labor of organizing working people to build political power, and to expressing their own ideas and political theories about how best to do so. By the time of their respective deaths in 1964, 1999, and 2008, none of the three was a card-carrying CPUSA member, yet each still referred to herself as a communist, democratic socialist, or Marxist.² They were red-tinted to the end.

“Red Lives” returns these three working-class non-white women—who shaped twentieth century social movements for decades—to the center of American communism and anticommunism’s history. Jones, Tenayuca, and McElrath were not alone. They represent a generation of organizers who came-of-age during the 1930s, and forged organizing and political commitments in the communist-led Popular Front coalitions and the Great Depression’s mass actions. Other members of this generation appear in passing here as well, but these three best

² Claudia Jones (1915-1964), Emma Tenayuca (1916-1999), Ah Quon McElrath (1915-2008). For obituaries, see “Claudia Jones Memorial Issue,” *West Indian Gazette & Afro-Asian-Caribbean News* (January 1965); “Longtime Labor Organizer Dies at 82,” *El Paso Times*, July 25, 1999; Christie Wilson, “Hawaii Union, Social Activist Ah Quon McElrath Dies at 92,” *Honolulu Advertiser*, December 13, 2008.

illustrate the geographic reach and longevity of the Popular Front-era social movements, and the women, immigrants, and people of color who played significant roles in their organizations' grassroots and national leadership.³

In documenting the organizing activities of these radical women, “Red Lives” also provides an example of working-class intellectual history. Jones, Tenayuca, and McElrath each produced important cultural and theoretical work that underpinned their organizing strategies and offered radical analyses—with race, gender, and class at the core—of capitalism, democracy, and social movements.⁴ Their on-the-ground, daily experiences in organizing other working people to take part in strikes, mass demonstrations, and electoral politics offer empirical illustrations of those analyses in motion, as do the challenges they faced in building sustainable careers and economic security from their efforts.

These women embody the complexity of American communism and its lasting influence in twentieth century social movements. Telling their stories offers a window into the divisions, debates, and dissent among and between national leaders and grassroots organizers occupied in building anti-racist and feminist movements focused on economic justice. Their grassroots

³ Other women with commitments to similar organizing models and socialist or communist politics in this generation include Genora Dollinger (1913-1995), Dorothy Healey (1914-2006), Sallye Bell Davis (1914-2007), and Esther Cooper Jackson (1917-present). See Carlton Jackson, *Child of the Sit-Downs: The Revolutionary Life of Genora Dollinger* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2008); Beth Slutsky, *Gendering Radicalism: Women and Communism in Twentieth-Century California* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska, 2015); Erik McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011); Sara Haviland, *James and Esther Cooper Jackson: Love and Courage in the Black Freedom Movement* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2015).

⁴ For key examples, see Emma Tenayuca and Homer Brooks, “The Mexican Question in the Southwest,” *Political Affairs* (March 1939); Claudia Jones, “An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman,” *Political Affairs* (June 1949); Ah Quon McElrath, “Race Relations and the Political Economy in Hawai’i,” *Social Process in Hawai’i* 39 (1999): 74-84.

radicalism and organizing strategies offer both a record and road map of opportunities and pitfalls in creating the coalitions, campaigns, and political theory necessary for a more just world.

The Popular Front Generation

Jones, Tenayuca, and McElrath represent the ideals of the Popular Front come to life, but also those ideals' under-recognized longevity as a constant strain of radical politics in twentieth-century America, from the 1930s through the 1960s and into the 1980s.⁵ This dissertation names these women "Popular Fronters" and their politics and organizing strategies "Popular Frontism" because the terms underscore the formation and significance of their communism and organizing experiences in the 1930s to their activism in future decades. Exemplary of the Popular Front's imaginary and enactment, these young women communists were a fundamental part of labor and civil rights histories throughout the twentieth century.

Born during World War I, in cities etched with the histories of colonialism and empire, each woman grew up aware of her own family history of migration and immigration. Jones, a British colonial subject, immigrated from her hometown, Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, to New York's Harlem in the 1920s. Tenayuca, like generations of her family before her, was born in San Antonio, Texas, the descendant of Spanish colonists, indigenous Indians, and Tejanos who had lived in the American Southwest before U.S. annexation made Texas its 28th state in 1845.

⁵ Michael Denning restores socialist intellectual traditions and theories on race to the cultural work of the Popular Front. He defines the Popular Front as a historical bloc and a social movement centered on progressive electoral politics, anti-fascism and anti-imperialism, and civil liberties campaigns against racist violence and the repression of labor rights. He demonstrates that the Popular Front was as dedicated to racial justice as it was to trade unionism. Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997), 9, 423, 466.

McElrath, the daughter of two Chinese immigrants who had emigrated to Hawai'i from Guangdong Province in the 1890s, was born a U.S. citizen in Honolulu on the island of Oahu, part of the U.S.'s Territory of Hawaii, which did not become a state until 1959.

Equal members of the Popular Front generation despite these different geographies and family histories, they shared similar life experiences marked by the economic and social transformations following the Great War: family poverty that resulted in lengthy separations from their parents in the 1920s, a traumatic and untimely death of a parent or grandparent, and limited access to jobs or a college education after their high school graduations in the mid-1930s. Hardships at home did not prevent them from excelling in formal and informal education; they each competed on debate teams and won school awards. As teenagers, they marched on picket lines or in mass demonstrations to protest alongside women cigar workers in San Antonio, or young five-and-dime store clerks who worked at Kress (the Walmart of their day) in Harlem and Honolulu. Each joined the Young Communist League (YCL) during the CPUSA's Popular Front period, a decision that created new opportunities, choices, and conflicts in their personal and professional lives.

The connection between the Popular Front and the Communist Party has rendered both histories and historiographies of the period politically fraught, distorting perceptions of the generation it formed, and its legacy.⁶ Some historians have defined the Popular Front within narrow parameters, as little more than a four-year episode based in the Soviet Union's call for strategic alliances against fascism in 1935 to its nonaggression pact with the Nazis in 1939.

⁶ James N. Gregory, for example, rejects the term Popular Front because it overemphasizes the role of the CPUSA, instead referring to the left-liberal social movements of the 1930s and 1940s as the "New Deal Left." James N. Gregory, "Remapping the American Left: A History of Radical Discontinuity," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History* 2, no. 2 (2020), 23.

Interpreting the Popular Front more as a Comintern scheme than a grassroots movement, they assert, for instance, that CPUSA members' commitment to racial equality, while effective in gaining Black support, was primarily contingent on Moscow's dictates.⁷

In some ways, the rhetorical connotations of the term "Popular Front" can further encourage such caricatures and limited periodizations. The "front" as a military metaphor over-emphasizes the movement's opposition to the rise of fascism in the 1930s. The idea of a "front" as a false façade, meanwhile, recalls anticommunist depictions of duplicitous radicals using the movement's coalitions as cats' paws for the Communist Party's international priorities.

More sympathetic studies, while often still limiting the Popular Front in the United States to a brief but significant moment in the late 1930s, recognize it as a moment when Communists and New Deal left-liberals built interracial and cross-class coalitions to push for a national agenda of trade unionism, anti-fascism, international solidarity, and civil rights. Such work has provided evidence of CPUSA members' authentic commitment to racial equality and trade union campaigns, to multiracial, cross-class coalition building, and to supporting democratic electoral politics. Some scholars date the Popular Front's origins earlier—to an upsurge of strikes across the United States in 1933—and extend its influence to the postwar period, if not later.⁸

⁷ For evidence of the longevity of this idea, see Harold Cruse, *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York: Morrow, 1967); Eric Arnesen, "No 'Graver Danger': Black Anticommunism, the Communist Party, and the Race Question," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 3, no. 4 (2006), 13-52. As an example, see Eric Arnesen's descriptions: "party members shed their sectarian skin" during the Popular Front, "ceased denouncing liberals and Socialists as 'social fascists,' donned the cloak of Americanism and patriotism, pursued political legitimacy, and worked tirelessly to build broad-based alliances to support the New Deal and oppose fascism."

⁸ For a discussion of the Popular Front's periodization and its social movement and cultural formations, see Gregory, "Remapping the American Left," 21-28; Gerald Horne, *Communist Front? The Civil Rights Congress, 1946-1956* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1988); Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 4-20; Chris Vials, *Realism for the Masses*:

As this work shows, Popular Front communist activists' emphasis on grassroots community needs, civil liberties, political education, and labor organizing repeatedly took precedence over the CPUSA's or Comintern's official domestic and international priorities. American communists in local communities often ignored dramatic shifts in Soviet policy at national and international levels, instead continuing to engage in on-the-ground labor and civil rights organizing. Fair housing and employment laws, desegregation, and voting rights, for instance, remained key goals for many Popular Front organizers throughout World War II and into the postwar period.

Finding the roots of women's liberation and civil rights movements in the Popular Front, historians have identified different terminologies, such as "labor feminist" and "Black left feminist," for this cohort and their politics in order to extend the Popular Front's timeline and underscore its commitment to anti-racist and feminist activism.⁹ Black left feminists, in particular, led mid-century movements and organizations engaged in cross-class struggles for race and gender justice. Historians of the Black Popular Front trace the networks of African-Americans who were radicalized in the 1930s and then active into the early Cold War decades.¹⁰

Aesthetics, Popular Front Pluralism, and U.S. Culture, 1935-1947 (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2009), xxvi-xxix. Denning marks two separate endings for Popular Front: the first in the early 1960s with the emergence of the New Left, and the second with the actual deaths of the last members of the depression cohort at the end of the twentieth century; Vials claims that Popular Front cultural production last until at least 1947.

⁹ For discussions of mid-century activism and politics with feminism and working-class women at the center, see Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*; Dayo Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads: African American Women Activists in the Cold War* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2011), 7-11.

¹⁰ On the Black Popular Front, see Mary Helen Washington, "Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry and Claudia Jones: Black Women Write the Popular Front," in *Left of the Color Line: Race, Radicalism, and Twentieth-Century Literature of the United States*, edited by Bill V.

These scholars assert that anti-racist and feminist activism in the Popular Front’s day-to-day social movements seeded the modern civil rights and women’s movements long before Rosa Parks or Betty Friedan—who had organized for decades prior—launched the Montgomery bus boycott or published *The Feminine Mystique*, respectively.¹¹

Beginning in the 1930s, the three women featured in “Red Lives” practiced pro-labor, feminist, and anti-racist politics, although none would have referred to herself as a feminist at the time. The terms Black left feminism and labor feminism go a long way in describing these women’s politics, but the definitions do not adequately take into account the communist-affiliated social movements that shaped their worldview in the late-1930s. Understanding Jones, Tenayuca, and McElrath as Popular Fronters—and seeing the resonances of their lives as a function of their shared Popular Frontism—begins to reclaim and extend these more expansive possible meanings for the Popular Front, while bringing them together under a coherent signifier. Despite its limitations and pitfalls, the term “Popular Front” remains an indispensable marker, encompassing an unwieldy amalgam of individuals and organizations that came together in the 1930s to build a movement, waging local struggles against race and gender discrimination in

Mullen and James Smethurst (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003) 185; McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*, 91-125; Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003). On the Popular Front in the American South, see Glenda Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008), 185-189, 210-214.

¹¹ For discussions of Rosa Parks’s and Betty Friedan’s decades of civil rights and labor organizing, and the consequences for the erasure of these decades in popular discourse, see Jeanne Theoharis, “The Real Rosa Parks Story is Better Than the Fairy Tale,” *New York Times*, February 1, 2021; Jeanne Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013); Daniel Horowitz, *Betty Friedan and the Making of the Feminist Mystique: The American Left, the Cold War, and Modern Feminism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998).

workplaces, housing, and the criminal justice system, while also campaigning for federal civil rights, pro-labor, and social welfare legislation in the New Deal.

“Red Lives” is a side-by-side social and biographical history. Its three talented organizer and working-class intellectual subjects, Popular Fronters in their lives and careers, illustrate how radical working-class women of color shaped twentieth century multiracial, cross-class social movements. Their far-flung stories underscore the geographic breadth of working-class women’s leadership in twentieth-century U.S. labor and political activism. Although their politics and organizing priorities took different forms depending on where they lived and organized, they shared a worldview that encompassed common strategies and theories across various movements, historical moments, and even nations. Examining this worldview and its diverse manifestations re-centers the unemployed, youth, and independent union movements—often overshadowed by the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO)—in histories of Popular Front organizing. It recovers the making of an American working-class consciousness that did not erase experiences or understandings of racial, ethnic, and gender differences.

It also recovers the opponents of that consciousness. Jones, Tenayuca, and McElrath forged their politics in direct, often violent, conflict with capital and the state during their youths. Their stories shed light on the unbroken history of both reactionary opposition to radical, multiracial, working-class women’s activism in twentieth-century America, and of that activism’s perseverance and influence. “Red Lives” tells these stories, drawing on oral histories, personal letters, manuscript writings, newspapers, government records, and published work from archives in Texas, New York, London, and Hawai’i, as well as various secondary scholarly and biographical accounts.

The Popular Front's Political Theories and Organizing Models

For Popular Fronters in the 1930s, the CPUSA represented a powerful and logical institutional platform, especially for campaigns for racial and gender equality. Its national and local leadership urged solidarity with anti-imperialist and anti-fascist struggles in Ethiopia and Spain, support for the Roosevelt Administration's New Deal, collaborations with civil liberties groups and unions affiliated with the newly formed CIO, and mobilizations against police brutality and for anti-lynching legislation.

Coming of age during or just before the CPUSA's "Communism is Twentieth Century Americanism" period, Jones, Tenayuca, and McElrath imagined their radical politics as deeply rooted in the ideals and failures of multiracial democracy in America, as much as in the promise of socialism. One key tenet of their grassroots radicalism was that American national identity was fundamentally multiracial, and that narratives of U.S. history should highlight the way labor organizing by people of color and immigrants shaped the nation. Developing this form of radicalism through political education, particularly in radical and union-affiliated workers' schools, played an important role in each woman's life, and remained essential to their understanding of how to change the world.

"The rich traditions of the Negro people, in building America to what it is today," wrote Jones in a YCL magazine in 1938, "the best traditions of Negro culture, their folk art and heroic struggles for emancipation should be familiar to every YCLer and progressive person."¹² For decades, Jones wrote articles and taught classes about Black Americans, and then Black Britons, who organized in movements for social justice. Her dual careers as a journalist and an organizer

¹² Claudia Jones, "Recent Trends Among Negro Youth," *Young Communist Review* (July 1938), 17.

gave her opportunities to tell the stories of Black activists from across the globe in the pages of the radical press, and encourage others to join her in what she saw as history in the making.

“The traditions our country has here are tremendous,” Tenayuca told an interviewer in 1981. “You consider the Declaration of Independence—true you men did not include us women in the Bill of Rights, you did not include the Indians, you did not include the blacks, but somewhere we’re attempting to solve these problems.”¹³ An abiding faith in democracy did not preclude her from criticizing what in her view were the nation’s sexist, imperialist, and racist policies. Instead, she demanded an accounting of American history, particularly in the Southwest, that explained its shifting borders and the lives of its multiethnic inhabitants. In an essay published in 1939 and in numerous oral histories recorded in the 1970s, she advocated for bilingual education in schools, and for the centrality of Spanish-speaking communities in the formation of the American nation. Aligning herself late in life with San Antonio’s grassroots organizers and political activists, many of them non-white women, in the 1970s and 1980s, Tenayuca held fast to both her criticism of and faith in American democracy and socialist politics.

“We must recognize and pass on the story of the magnificent role the forebears of immigrants have played in the development of this country and their battles for freedom and justice,” wrote McElrath in 1994.¹⁴ Throughout her career in the labor movement, she had opportunities to teach union members and educate the public about the contributions that

¹³ Emma Tenayuca, interview by Allan Turner, 1981, transcript, Allan Turner Collection, Box 2X88, Briscoe Center for American History and Barker Texas History Collection, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX (hereafter ATC).

¹⁴ Ah Quon McElrath, “From Old to New Plantations: Labor’s Growing Pains,” in *New Visions in Asian American Studies: Diversity, Community, Power*, edited by Franklin Ng, et al (Pullman, WA: Washington State University Press, 1994), 11.

organizers with Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino heritage made to progressive politics in Hawai'i. Her speeches, interviews, and essays over the years persistently featured the multiracial and multiethnic groups of strikers and their families, grassroots political activists, and radical organizers who transformed the American territory's political economy.

Another significant principle in these women's shared political theory and organizing strategies was the understanding that political and labor movements must be rank-and-file and grassroots led, as well as deeply embedded in local communities and the needs of working families. In 1936, Communist Party leader William Z. Foster had published a set of tactics and strategies for organizing the steel industry that formed the basis of communist-affiliated organizing campaigns in the labor movement. His principles prioritized: building left-liberal coalitions and democratic industrial unions, rank-and-file led mass meetings, demonstrations, and political education, and working-class political activity. Foster called for rank-and-file organizing committees for white and Black workers, youth, the foreign-born, and women. There should be "corps of women organizers in the field," he wrote.¹⁵

Similarly, these three women each nurtured grassroots leadership and multiracial, cross-class community-labor alliances in their own cities, and emphasized extending voting rights and expanding New Deal era democratic politics as ways to build working-class power. Their notion of political power relied less on mobilizing voters on Election Day, and more on organizing community members to run for local offices—on the school board or the city council where local budgets are decided—and to participate in mass actions and demonstrations. Shop floor and

¹⁵ While there is no direct evidence that these three women read William Z. Foster's pamphlet on organizing, each expressed admiration for Foster in letters or oral histories. William Z. Foster, *Organizing Methods in the Steel Industry* (New York: Workers Library, 1936). Foster also recommended that workers form collaborations with the National Negro Congress, American Youth Congress, and Workers Alliance.

workplace issues could be won, they believed, with the support of the community and progressive legislation. Moreover, unions had a responsibility to provide social services—political education and organizer training, for instance—to family members and the unorganized not covered by union contracts.

From their earliest organizing days, these women interpreted the meaning of “worker” as far broader than the popularized idea of the (white) industrial laborer in a factory or a mine. As young communists, they attempted to organize the unemployed, youth, and immigrants—groups that national leadership in America’s labor unions and political parties often ignored or reviled—as both workers and community members.¹⁶ Radical-led labor unions, Popular Front organizations, and other social justice groups gave them opportunities to put that understanding to use through collective action and local politics.

“The only party which has consistently stood against racialism,” editorialized Jones in her London-based newspaper in 1964, “is the Communist Party.”¹⁷ As a prominent Party leader and grassroots organizer for decades, first in the U.S. and then in the U.K., she joined or created multiple cross-class, multiracial organizations that affiliated with labor unions, advocated for civil rights and enfranchisement, and encouraged grassroots participation in local politics. While deeply critical of the major political parties’ failure to address racial and gender discrimination, she continued to push for legislative solutions to inequality. In New York and London, she built

¹⁶ For a discussion of the CIO’s and the CPUSA’s legacy in modern organizing strategies (especially the idea of the “whole worker” and “organic leaders”), see Jane McAlevey, *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 9-16, 27-70; Jane McAlevey, “The Crisis of New Labor and Alinsky’s Legacy: Revising the Role of Organic Grassroots Leaders in Building Powerful Organizations and Movements,” *Politics and Society* 43, no. 3 (2015), 415-441.

¹⁷ Claudia Jones, “Editorial: Elections, and Racial Hypocrisy,” *West Indian Gazette & Afro-Asian-Caribbean News* (October 1964).

community-based coalitions that mobilized for local, national, and international policies for self-determination and freedom from oppression.

Tenayuca strove to do the same in San Antonio. “I had a vision of a huge hall on the West Side, possibly maintained by several unions—pecan, laundry, ironworkers—which would become a center where you would help people become citizens, where you would have classes in English,” she recalled in 1983. “The union had to serve as a social service organization because of the conditions of the people.”¹⁸ In the late 1930s, Tenayuca created a precursor to contemporary Workers’ Centers in a San Antonio hall, where volunteers taught citizenship classes, provided advice how on how to secure New Deal jobs and benefits, and created a political culture steeped in cross-border collaborations to support Mexican immigrants.¹⁹ A member of the Communist Party for over ten years, Tenayuca called herself a socialist later in life, but with many conditions. She defined socialism as a process, an “educational endeavor, where people learn to work together, where they learn to think together.”²⁰ For Tenayuca, this endeavor took place in community-labor alliances and in democratic politics.

“We got involved in women’s so-called politics very early, before they even thought about feminism,” McElrath told an interviewer in 2006, “because we figured that they were all part of the family, they are all affected by what happens to the male worker.”²¹ As a social worker and organizer, she was instrumental in building community-labor alliances that offered

¹⁸ Geoffrey Rips, “Living History: Emma Tenayuca Tells her Story,” *Texas Observer: A Journal of Free Voices*, October 28, 1983, 14.

¹⁹ For a history of worker centers in the U.S., see Janice Fine, *Worker Centers: Organizing Communities on the Edge of the Dream* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

²⁰ Rips, “Living History: Emma Tenayuca Tells Her Story,” 12.

²¹ Ah Quon McElrath, interview by author, May 2006, Honolulu, Hawai’i.

opportunities for women (both wage workers and those who performed nonwage work in the home) to support working-class demands in union contracts and social welfare legislation.

Central to these women's Popular Front politics and organizing models was their belief that unless women of color are free from oppression, no one can be free. As working-class intellectuals, all three published works about how revolutionary politics must be based simultaneously in multiracial and cross-class campaigns for race, gender, and economic justice. They each applied Marxist-Leninist theories of self-determination, race, gender, and imperialism to their grassroots organizing campaigns. Decades before Kimberlé Crenshaw and other critical race theorists introduced the term "intersectionality," they advocated for racial, gender, and economic justice as inextricable struggles with asymmetrical valences.²²

"The triply-oppressed status of Negro women is a barometer of the status of all women," Jones wrote in 1949, and "the fight for the full economic, political and social equality of the Negro woman is in the vital self-interest of the fight to realize equality for all women."²³ In 1939, Tenayuca linked the separate civil rights struggles then happening in the Southwest and the South in an essay published in the communist press. "For the special exploitation of the Mexican people in the Southwest is, in many respects, simply a continuation of the special exploitation and oppression to which the Negro people in the South have been subjected," she

²² The concept of "intersectionality" inextricably links race, gender, and class in the shaping of experiences and structures. An intersectional analysis of freedom (political, economic, or social), for example, poses that all forms of oppression must be addressed and eliminated for a free and equal society to fully exist. For key texts on the meaning of intersectionality, particularly in the histories of black feminism, see Beverly Guy-Sheftall, ed., *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* (New York: New Press, 1995); Kimberlé Crenshaw, ed., *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement* (New York: New Press, 1996).

²³ Claudia Jones, "We Seek Full Equality for Women," *Daily Worker*, September 4, 1949.

wrote. “A blow against the oppression of one will be a blow for the freedom of both.”²⁴ For McElrath, the only way for women to gain freedom from oppression was through trade unionism. As she told an interviewer in 1978, “[T]rade unions are still, in our kind of society, the only social organization that can lift women immediately out of poverty and give them some measure of control over their lives.”²⁵ All three of these Popular Fronters insisted that working people, especially women, had the capacity for political consciousness, the courage to take collective action and lead others, and the ability to understand complex social theories.

“Popular Fronters” and “Popular Frontism,” then, are terms encapsulating this complex set of ideas and ideologies that attaches to particular radical grassroots organizers and leaders from the Depression-era generation. Jones, Tenayuca, and McElrath joined the Popular Front social movements of the 1930s and 1940s, yet continued to express and remake its principles during later campaigns for race, gender, and economic justice, each championing communist-inflected, anti-racist, and feminist politics until the end of her life. As pragmatic leaders and organizers, they changed strategies, tactics, and organizations over their lifetimes—and sometimes stepped out of political activism—but through repression and progress, violence and victories, their radicalism endured their entire lives. Placed alongside one another, they make visible the legacy of Popular Frontism in social movements from the 1950s onward.

²⁴ Tenayuca and Brooks, “The Mexican Question,” 267.

²⁵ Ah Quon McElrath, “The Challenge is Still There,” in *Rocking the Boat: Union Women’s Voices 1915-1975*, Brigid O’Farrell and Joyce L. Kornbluh, eds. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 158.

The History and Historiography of U.S. Communism and Anticommunism

Building on grassroots social history and cultural studies scholarship, “Red Lives” challenges the dominant institutional historiography of the CPUSA and American communism, demonstrating that communist-influenced organizing and political theories long outlasted the Party’s relevance. It traces the continual role that various Party institutions and diverse radicalisms played in the lives of Jones, Tenayuca, and McElrath, and presents fresh evidence of a grassroots American radicalism—Popular Frontism—far more influential, lasting, and independent from the control of either Comintern or CPUSA leaders than previously recognized. Establishing the continuity of Popular Frontism across the twentieth century simultaneously permits a clearer awareness of its counterpart: continuous and intimate forms of anticommunist repression. This awareness disturbs the common misperception of McCarthyism as a deviation from, rather an intensification of, norms in American political life. It does so in particular by illustrating the deep ideological inextricability—stretching back to the nineteenth century and forward to the twenty-first—between anticommunism and white supremacy.²⁶

The first historians of twentieth century American communism approached their subject as an outlier, putting the CPUSA and the Soviet Union’s Comintern at the center of their narratives, and describing the movement as top-down, centralized, and anti-American.²⁷ By the 1980s, social historians looked instead to rank-and-file CPUSA members’ experiences in local

²⁶ In reference to Gerald Horne’s body of work on American communism and race, Erik McDuffie uses the “Horne Thesis” term to describe the argument that white supremacy and anticommunism were intimately linked and together shaped postwar and Cold War politics. See, Erik McDuffie, “Black and Red, Black Liberation, the Cold War, and the Horne Thesis,” *Journal of African American History* 96, no. 2 (Spring 2011), 236-247.

²⁷ See, for example, Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia: The Formative Years* (New York: Viking Press, 1963).

struggles, reimagining communist-influenced organizations, movements, and campaigns as authentically American.²⁸ After the opening of Moscow's Comintern Archives in the late 1990s, the historiography split further along these lines. On one side were those who continued to emphasize the Soviet Union's central role (arguing either that American communists were spies all along, or that they had committed a tragic mistake by aligning with Stalin's government).²⁹ On the other, some historians began to investigate how American Communists shaped social movements from the 1930s to the 1960s, particularly in terms of civil rights and women's liberation.³⁰

Historians on both sides of this debate have privileged the role of the CPUSA's national leadership, whether in direct relationship to the Soviet Union, or refracted by the U.S. government's attempts to limit the Party's influence in American culture, politics, and social movements. They have tended either to portray the Party as dominated by the Soviet Union's Comintern, or to focus on ways in which its "Americanization" matched grassroots organizing already in progress and provoked anticommunist domestic responses.

By focusing on the national Party leadership, these accounts frame the CPUSA's story either through the lens of Soviet-dictated strategy shifts, or U.S. government anticommunist

²⁸ For a key example of this scholarship, see Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

²⁹ For the former, see John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr, *In Denial: Historians, Communism, and Espionage* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2003); for the latter, see James R. Barrett, *William Z. Foster and the Tragedy of American Radicalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

³⁰ See Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights*; McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*; Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Sisters and Rebels: A Struggle for the Soul of America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019).

legislative and investigative practices. Such institutional histories express opposing political perspectives, but employ a common method and chronology to describe the rise and fall of the CPUSA—and often, by extension or conflation, the destiny of radicalism in America.³¹ Because this historiography has framed (and distorted) so many narratives of twentieth-century U.S. radicalism, its outline and conclusions are worth revisiting.

According to these accounts, the first heyday of CPUSA idealism in the late 1930s was short-lived. The Little Red Scare (1938-1941) arrived quickly, with government officials and business leaders using public hearings and new laws to undermine the Party's Popular Front collaborations with civil liberties groups and left-led labor unions, rolling back the gains that working-class people of color had achieved during the New Deal.³² In this sense, the still dominant story of communism in America begins under a pre-emptive cloud of doom.

Opposition to communism was certainly real. In May 1938, the U.S. House of Representatives created the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), nicknamed the Dies Committee after its chairman, Texas Congressman Martin Dies. It began public investigations into individuals and organizations accused of communist ties. Two years later, the Alien Registration Act of 1940 (more commonly known as the Smith Act, for its anti-labor Democrat and Virginia Congressman sponsor, Howard Smith) required all non-citizens living in

³¹ For examples of the former, see Harvey Klehr, *Heyday of American Communism, the Depression Decade* (New York: Basic Books, 1984); John Earl Haynes, *Red Scare or Red Menace?: American Communism and Anticommunism in the Cold War Era* (Chicago: Ivan Dee, 1996). For the latter, see Maurice Isserman, *Which Side Were You On? The American Communist Party during the Second World War*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982); Gerald Horne, *Black Liberation/Red Scare: Ben Davis and the Communist Party* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1994).

³² For a detailed account of the Little Red Scare, see Isserman, *Which Side Were You On?*, 67-73; Ellen Schrecker, *Many are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1998), 90-97.

the United States to be fingerprinted and registered with the federal government.³³ The Act criminalized any activities intended to teach, advocate, or encourage the violent overthrow of the U.S. government. It mandated that foreign-born radicals register their Party membership, and permitted the government to deport immigrants who belonged to the Communist Party and other radical organizations.³⁴ These forms of chilling surveillance undercut immigrants' constitutional rights to free speech and made them subject to deportation. By 1941, the dominant institutional historiography concludes, the Little Red Scare had so chipped away at CPUSA members' and Party-affiliated organizations' influence in American politics and culture as to constitute a definitive historical break.

Meanwhile, the Party's national leadership had struggled to keep up with the Comintern's jarring policy pivots. In August 1939, the Soviet Union signed a nonaggression pact with the Nazis. In response the CPUSA leaders shifted the Party's priorities away from the Popular Front's anti-fascism and commitment to civil liberties and racial equality, calling instead for an anti-war foreign policy that would keep America out of the conflict. Many historians depict the Hitler-Stalin Pact as a breaking point for grassroots American communists, who quit the Party rather than align themselves with fascists. The CPUSA national leadership's defense of the Pact over the U.S. government's anticommunist legislation appears as the root cause of mass departure from the Party.

³³ This dissertation will use the formal names, rather than the nicknames, for the various Acts used for anticommunists' purposes, in an attempt to disrupt the ways in which the commonly known names (ie. Smith Act) have come to be connected to the relatively short McCarthyism period and disconnected from the history of anti-immigration legislation.

³⁴ For more on the consequences of the Alien Registration Act for immigrants and people of color, see Carole Boyce Davies, "Deportable Subjects: U.S. Immigration Laws and the Criminalizing of Communism," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 100: 4 (Fall 2001), 957.

By the end of 1941, after Hitler's forces had invaded the Soviet Union and Japan had bombed Hawai'i, the CPUSA's Soviet influenced-national policy swung again. With the U.S. entry to the war, the CPUSA's national leadership discouraged (even if it did not quite abandon) labor and civil rights militancy, pushing an all-out focus to defeat anti-fascism and the Axis powers. The American labor movement also gave full support to the war effort—both the CIO and the American Federation of Labor (AFL) signed no-strike pledges, and acquiesced to the government's demands for increased production in war industries. The radical-led CIO unions, which by 1943 had a significant number of communist members, toed the Party line, too.³⁵ The CPUSA's shift to backing the war undercut the Party's radicalism on workers' rights and racial equality in the labor movement.

In the post-World War II period, a resurgence of Popular Front-style activism with its focus on racial equality and labor rights drew new converts to the CPUSA (which by 1947 claimed seventy-five thousand members, a brief peak) and the CIO unions.³⁶ Despite enjoying broad support in the labor and civil rights movements, however, the CPUSA was buckling under government repression, anticommunist purges in the labor movement, and an increasingly isolated national leadership. An upsurge of strikes and activism could not stave off the growing conflicts over communism, U.S. foreign policy, and organizing strategies within the CIO. At the CIO convention in 1946, its national leadership demanded that all delegates reject communism,

³⁵ For more history on the CPUSA, CIO, and World War II, see Isserman, *Which Side Were You On?*, 127-213; Schrecker, *Many are the Crimes*, 94-104; Robert H. Zieger, *The CIO, 1935–1955* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Nelson Lichtenstein, *Labor's War at Home: The CIO in World War II* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 142-145. Lichtenstein states that, in 1943, communists constituted between a quarter and a third of the CIO's membership.

³⁶ Schrecker, *Many are the Crimes*, 19.

and prevented radical-led locals from presenting policy resolutions that deviated from official CIO stands.³⁷

In response to the strike wave of 1945 and 1946, the federal government passed the Labor Management Relations Act of 1947, which required all union leaders to sign affidavits stating that they were not communists. It also prohibited solidarity strikes, secondary boycotts, and mass picketing—all tools and strategies that labor organizers had employed successfully to win union recognition and concessions from employers over the previous decades. Known as “Taft-Hartley,” the Labor Management Relations Act proved devastating for the American labor movement and marked the onset of another discrete period in the dominant historiography: the Second Red Scare (1947 to 1958).

It also marked the beginning of the Cold War in America. The federal response to radical, left, and labor organizing intensified in this period. Congress had championed new laws, passing several (including the Labor Management Act) over a presidential veto, which would limit labor rights and free speech. McCarthyism imposed more restrictions—formal and otherwise—on American citizens’ and non-citizens’ political activities and beliefs.³⁸ During the 1950s, a slew of laws gave the federal government ever-greater power to contain left and labor activism. Against the backdrop of U.S. military support for South Korea’s battle against Soviet- and China-backed North Korea, the government gained the right to imprison CPUSA members, and to deport or exile individual communists from America, most often immigrant labor leaders. The Internal

³⁷ Lichtenstein, *Labor’s War at Home*, 234-241; Zieger, *The CIO, 1935–1955*.

³⁸ Isserman, *Which Side Were You On?*, 244-254; Maurice Isserman, *If I Had a Hammer: The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1987), 1-34; Schrecker, *Many are the Crimes*; Landon R. Y. Storrs, *The Second Red Scare and the Unmaking of the New Deal Left* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

Security Act of 1950 (or McCarran Act for its sponsor, Senator Pat McCarran) passed a few months after the outbreak of the Korean War. It required all CPUSA-affiliated organizations to register with the U.S. Attorney General, and allowed the government to arrest and detain any suspected radicals or members of communist-affiliated organizations.³⁹

In the spring of 1952, Congress enacted the Immigration and Nationality Act (known as the McCarran-Walter Act), which defined any non-citizen who belonged to an organization on the Attorney General's subversive list as a 'deportable alien.'⁴⁰ With the support of many liberals in Congress, the Communist Control Act of 1954 made membership in the CPUSA a crime subject to prison sentences and fines, providing yet another weapon in the state's assaults on left-led labor unions, as well as Black and women's liberation politics.⁴¹

By the late 1950s, a combination of domestic politics and international foreign policy had decimated the CPUSA's membership, the communist social movement, and many if not most left-led CIO unions. The CIO had expelled a number of successful radical-led unions in the early 1950s and merged with the AFL in 1955 to form the AFL-CIO. The new organization's merger agreement identified communism with corruption, and pledged to keep both out of the labor movement, declaring "The merged federation shall constitutionally affirm its determination to

³⁹ The Internal Security Act also prevented non-citizen members of radical-affiliated organizations from becoming citizens, and provided the government with legal means to strip some naturalized citizens of their citizenship and confiscate previously issued passports. Additionally, the Act criminalized picketing outside Federal Courthouses, allowing police to arrest and charge any such protestor with a felony. See Boyce Davies, "Deportable Subjects;" Storrs, *The Second Red Scare*.

⁴⁰ Schrecker, *Many are the Crimes*, 141; Storrs, *The Second Red Scare*, 225; Boyce Davies, "Deportable Subjects."

⁴¹ Isserman, *If I Had a Hammer*, 97; Schrecker, *Many are the Crimes*, 357; Horne, *Black Liberation/Red Scare*, 266.

protect the American trade union movement from any and all corrupt influence, and from the undermining efforts of Communist agencies and all others who are opposed to the basic principles of our democracy and of free and democratic trade unionism.”⁴² Shedding the CIO’s previous commitments to racial justice, rank-and-file leadership, and organizing the unorganized, the AFL-CIO instead prioritized electoral politics and support for the Democratic Party. The CPUSA had almost completely faded from view by 1958, reduced to a few thousand die-hard and effectively marginalized Marxists. Federal loyalty oaths, HUAC hearings, and the CIO’s anticommunist purge—according to the institutional narrative—hollowed out communists’ influence in democratic politics and mass movements.

It is a grim timeline for communists. To review, Party membership surged briefly until 1938, then sagged after the onset of the Little Red Scare and the Hitler-Stalin Pact. The Party rebounded for a spell during and after the war by drawing from coalitions in the labor movement and Democratic politics. But repression negated this renaissance almost immediately. By 1958, when the Cold War was in full swing, the Second Red Scare and the Soviet Union’s 1956 acknowledgment of Stalin’s crimes and invasion of Hungary had caused U.S. communist enthusiasm to crater under the weight of McCarthyism and disillusionment with Soviet totalitarianism. All in all, according to the institutional historiography, communism remains foreign, aberrant, exceptional, and marginal in the story of the American century.

A New History and Chronology of American Communism: The Long Popular Front

There are at least two major problems with this scholarship. First, putting U.S. and USSR political history and the CPUSA’s national structures at the center of histories of U.S. radicalism

⁴² “The AFL-CIO Merger Agreement,” reprinted in *ILR Review*, 9, no. 1 (October 1955), 122.

overemphasizes the Soviet Union's influence on communists' local campaigns, underestimating the role of other radical traditions in the activity of ordinary CPUSA members. Institutional and political histories often claim that the rank-and-file shared the leadership's deference to Soviet policy directives, failing to capture on-the-ground participants' multitude of experiences within the Party and its affiliated organizations and movements. Descriptions of legal structures and government actions highlight the state's power to suppress dissent, but rarely portray communist activists' and leaders' grassroots operations, particularly in campaigns for racial and gender justice.

Second, it largely leaves intact McCarthyism's reputation as an exception in the political and cultural history of the nation. In this story, McCarthyism did its job in dispatching the CPUSA before withering under liberal calls for a return to "decency." This popular tale obscures the deep and durable connection between anticommunism and white supremacy in American life.⁴³ The use of antiradicalism to attack campaigns for gender and racial equality during the McCarthy years was a distilled iteration of a lasting norm. The vision of "Red Scares" as exceptional moments in American history conceals the consistency, throughout the twentieth century, of anticommunism as a primary mode of white supremacist attack on radical women and people of color involved in civil liberties and labor rights activism.

Cultural scholars, biographers, and social historians provide more textured studies of communists' broad influence in American society and culture. Michael Denning and Benjamin Balthaser, for instance, examine how the American communist movement shaped literature,

⁴³ Marxist historian Gerald Horne's biography of communist Ben Davis is an exception in this scholarship in that he extends Davis's influence in the civil rights movement into the 1960s and maintains that the CPUSA continued to prioritize civil rights no matter the Soviet directives. See Horne, *Black Liberation/Red Scare*.

music, film, and mass media.⁴⁴ A number of biographies of the CPUSA's national leaders, including Ben Davis, William Z. Foster, Claudia Jones, Dorothy Healey, and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, offer detailed explorations of the connections between the personal and the political.⁴⁵ Emerging scholarship in African-American and women's history explores the meanings of race and gender in the Communist Party and communist movement, offering crucial re-imaginings of communist women's and people of color's contributions to radical politics during the Depression and Cold War periods.⁴⁶

Place-based histories of Communist Party districts and the grassroots activists who led them have demonstrated the specificity, and sometimes autonomy, of local Party branches' programs and priorities. They show how grassroots Party organizers often and repeatedly prioritized campaigns for racial and gender justice over fealty to the Communist International.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ For examples of scholarship on radical culture, see Michael E. Brown, et al, eds., *New Studies in the Politics and Culture of U.S. Communism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1993); Denning, *The Cultural Front*; Benjamin Balthaser, *Anti-Imperialist Modernism: Race and Transnational Radical Culture from the Great Depression to the Cold War* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016).

⁴⁵ See, for example, Horne, *Black Liberation/Red Scare*; Marika Sherwood, *Claudia Jones: Life in Exile* (London: Lawrence & Wishart Limited, 1999); Carole Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007); Slutsky, *Gendering Radicalism*; Lara Vapnek, *Elizabeth Gurley Flynn: Modern American Revolutionary* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2015).

⁴⁶ Mark Solomon, *The Cry Was Unity: Communists and African Americans, 1917-1936* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1998); Kate Weigand, *Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women's Liberation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Lashawn Harris, "Running with the Reds: African American Women and the Communist Party during the Great Depression," *Journal of African American History* 94:1 (Winter 2009), 21-43; McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*; Slutsky, *Gendering Radicalism*.

⁴⁷ See, for example, Paul Lyons, *Philadelphia Communists, 1936-1956* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982); Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1983); Andor Skotnes, "The Communist Party, Anti-Racism and the Freedom Movement, Baltimore 1930-1934," *Science & Society* 60.2 (1996), 164-194; Randi

This decentralized approach illustrates how homegrown demands for gender and racial equality often expanded campaigns for workplace and economic justice. Studying communism in particular communities—in Alabama, Harlem, and Chicago, among others—charts the interplay between local conditions, federal legislation, and international policy.

Emulating and building on this more granular work, “Red Lives” takes the unruly histories of three Popular Fronters as emblematic of communism’s and anticommunism’s ongoing role in U.S. history. Doing so not only disrupts still-dominant conceptions (both scholarly and popular) of the CPUSA and McCarthyism as deviations from a normative American liberalism, but also contributes to the growing appreciation for radicalism’s indispensable role in the civil rights and feminist movements of the mid- to late-twentieth century.⁴⁸ Cold War anticommunists attempted to dam the flow of knowledge and experience between the Popular Front generation and the 1950s and 1960s movement for racial and gender justice, but Popular Fronters did not abandon their worldview.

The scholarly literature reflects this—to an extent. Scholars of the long civil rights and feminist movements have located the origins of mid- and late-twentieth century movements in

Storch, *Red Chicago: American Communism at its Grassroots, 1928-1935* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007); Lashawn Harris, “Marvel Cooke: Investigative Journalist, Communist, and Black Radical Subject,” *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2012), 91-126; Gerald Horne, *Fighting in Paradise: Labor Unions, Racism, and Communism in the Making of Modern Hawaii* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2011); Margaret Stevens, *Red International and Black Caribbean: Communists in New York City, Mexico, and the West Indies, 1919-1939* (London: Pluto Press, 2017); Mary Stanton, *Red, Black, and White: The Alabama Communist Party, 1930-1950* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2019).

⁴⁸ For the archetypal statement of American liberalism as normative, see Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1955).

demands for race and gender equity during the 1930s and 1940s.⁴⁹ Labor historians have chronicled the generation of labor feminists who came-of-age in the Depression, and fought for women's rights in collective bargaining and legislation as part of AFL and CIO unions in postwar labor and political movements too often described as a male-dominated business unionism.⁵⁰ Recent scholarship in African-American and Mexican-American history unearths the roots of the modern civil rights movement in Popular Front-era campaigns for civil liberties and labor rights, and in the experiences of grassroots activists and local leaders in radical-affiliated organizations.⁵¹ Disrupting dominant narratives that focus on liberal campaigns calling for legislative solutions to end disenfranchisement and segregation in the Jim Crow South in the 1950s and 1960s, historians have uncovered the rich history of local struggles for racial and gender equity in the 1930s and 1940s. These accounts underscore the significant contribution that Popular Frontist coalitions, often led by radical women and people of color, made to Black

⁴⁹ For examples in this emerging field, see Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005), 1233-63; Gilmore, *Defying Dixie*; Robert Rodger Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Max Krochmal, *Blue Texas: The Making of a Multiracial Democratic Coalition in the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

⁵⁰ Nancy Gabin, *Feminism in the Labor Movement: Women and the United Auto Workers, 1935-1970* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); Annelise Orleck, *Common Sense and A Little Fire: Women and Working-Class Politics in the United States, 1900-1965* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement*.

⁵¹ Vicki Ruiz, "Una Mujer Sin Fronteras: Louisa Moreno and Latina Labor Activism," *Pacific Historical Review* 73, no.1 (Feb 2004), 1-20; Zaragosa Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights: Mexican American Workers in Twentieth Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Krochmal, *Blue Texas*; Gilmore, *Defying Dixie*; Horne, *Fighting in Paradise*; McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*; Biondi, *To Stand and Fight*; Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads*.

and Latino struggles in the Great Depression and immediate postwar period, particularly in the labor and civil rights movements.

Yet many of these scholars claim that anticommunism forced radical labor feminists out of the movement completely (rather than just from the AFL-CIO), and consequently, they fail to address how Cold War liberalism narrowed remaining labor feminists' political imagination for social change.⁵² The ideological pervasiveness of liberalism in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century United States has made it difficult to confront liberalism's historical limits, even in scholarship aimed at critiquing it. Many scholars recognize how the rise of Cold War liberalism in the twentieth century has obscured the legacies of Popular Fronters and their politics in civil rights, labor, and women's history of the postwar decades.⁵³ Reintegrating those legacies in a concrete way has remained elusive, especially for readers whose institutional and political contexts remain normatively liberal.

Still, some have begun to succeed, exploring Popular Fronters' legacy in Cold War politics and New Left organizations and re-envisioning the postwar political landscape, extending the significance of radical politics into the 1960s and 1970s.⁵⁴ One trend in this

⁵² See, for example, Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement*, 135; Storrs, *The Second Red Scare*; Ruiz, "Una Mujer Sin Fronteras."

⁵³ See, for example, Weigand, *Red Feminism*; Landon Storrs, "Red Scare Politics and the Suppression of Popular Front Feminism: The Loyalty Investigation of Mary Dublin Keyserling," *Journal of American History* (September 2003), 491-524.

⁵⁴ For examples of this body of scholarship, see Van Gosse, "'To Organize in Every Neighborhood, in Every Home': The Gender Politics of American Communists between the Wars," *Radical History Review* 50 (Spring 1991), 109-41; Rosalyn Baxandall, "The Question Seldom Asked: Women and the CPUSA," in Michael E. Brown et al., eds., *New Studies in the Politics and Culture of U.S. Communism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1993); Weigand, *Red Feminism*; Slutsky, *Gendering Radicalism*; Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx*; Harris, "Marvel Cooke: Investigative Journalist, Communist, and Black Radical Subject;" Francesca de

literature is the space of individual and collective biographies detailing the connections between the labor and civil rights movements of the 1930s and those of the 1950s and beyond.⁵⁵ Scholars of African-American history, in particular, reveal Black radical women's vibrant networks during the postwar and Cold War periods. Often outside formal leadership positions, Black left feminists shaped labor unions, the welfare state, and public discourse. Their activism illustrates how anticommunism displaced but did not destroy radical political visions.⁵⁶ Buttressing and extending this scholarship, "Red Lives" demonstrates that such visions had groundings not only in the Black radical tradition, but also in a Marxist commitment to multiracial working-class coalitions endemic to the Popular Front.

Three Women's Red Lives, Labors, and Legacies in the Twentieth Century

Born into a world of war and revolution and reaching adulthood during the Great Depression, Jones, Tenayuca, and McElrath do not fit neatly into either dominant narratives about American communism and anticommunism or the broader history of the Left in the United

Haan, "Eugénie Cotton, Pak Chong-ae, and Claudia Jones: Rethinking Transnational Feminism and International Politics," *Journal of Women's History* 25, no. 4 (Winter 2013), 174-189.

⁵⁵ Gerald Horne, *Race Woman: the Lives of Shirley Graham Du Bois* (New York: New York University Press, 2000); Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker & the Black Freedom Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Dayo Gore, Jeanne Theoharis, Komozi Woodard, eds. *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Barbara Ransby, *Eslanda: The Large and Unconventional Life of Mrs. Paul Robeson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

⁵⁶ McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*; Biondi, *To Stand and Fight*; Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads*; Cheryl Higashida, *Black Internationalist Feminism: Women Writers of the Black Left, 1945-1995* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011).

States.⁵⁷ Although they grew up under different political economies thousands of miles from each other, these women embraced similar hopes for a multiracial working-class American polity, and fought in parallel campaigns to expand civil liberties and economic justice. Constant repression that intensified in the 1950s—from employers, state agencies, and on some occasions their own unions or organizations—narrowed opportunities for their activism, but never their political imaginations.

As national or local CPUSA leaders, they displayed lifelong commitments to Popular Front radicalism, but on their own terms. From the agricultural fields outside Honolulu and San Antonio to the metropolises of New York and London, from the 1930s through the end of the twentieth century, their stories expand the geographic and temporal boundaries of U.S. social movements. The weaving together of their lives and careers illustrates the breadth of experience contained in the making of Popular Fronters, moving beyond the tropes of the white “Okie” migrating from the Dust Bowl or the burly autoworker striking at Ford’s River Rouge plant.

This dissertation broadens the vision of the Depression-era working class to include unemployed Mexican Americans marching for fair relief policies and access to housing in Texas, African-American youth demanding the passage of an anti-lynching bill in New York, and Chinese-American women picketing pineapple canneries in Hawaii. Telling these women’s stories decenters the Soviet Union’s role in histories of American radicalism and draws attention to other revolutionary traditions represented within the ranks of the CPUSA. Each of these women wrote or spoke about the importance of radical traditions from beyond the USSR,

⁵⁷ See Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 8. Denning defines Depression generation members as born between 1904 and 1923 and dates the end of the Popular Front and New Deal order to the end of this generation’s lifespan in the last decades of the twentieth century.

including revolutionary movements in Mexico and South America, Pan-African anti-colonialism in the West Indies, and workers' movements in Japan and the Philippines.

Each also faced contexts of anticommunism more diverse and long lasting than is commonly understood. Prominent federal anti-radical legislation periodically destabilized their lives, but local and state laws also remained constant obstacles in the years before and after “Red Scares.” Municipal and state authorities consistently used antiradicalism and white supremacy to attack civil liberties, such as the right of free speech and peaceable assembly, and to undermine multiracial social justice movements—particularly those demanding the expansion of democratic rights to people of color and all women. On-the-ground campaigns and official responses manifested differently in Harlem, San Antonio, and Honolulu, yet the similarities that emerge produce a common portrait of Popular Frontism’s persistence in battles to implement, protect, and extend the New Deal’s social welfare state.

Jones, Tenayuca, and McElrath did not lead easy lives. Divorce, separations, alcoholism, illness, arrests, and unemployment touched each of their families—difficulties that commitments to Popular Frontist organizing and politics often exacerbated. In their professional careers, too, tensions arose within their organizations and movements over campaign strategies, organizing models, and the meanings of political theory. They won some battles, lost many others, but they all built what fellow Popular Fronter Dorothy Healey called, “lives of meaning, of significance, in which the individual has both a responsibility to oneself and the rest of society.”⁵⁸ Before focusing further on specific aspects of the “meaning” and “significance,” brief overviews of their lives and related scholarship are in order.

⁵⁸ *Dorothy Healey: An American Red*, VHS, Directed by Eve Goldberg, 1983.

Claudia Jones, 1915-1964

Born in the British colony of Trinidad in 1915, Claudia (Cumberbatch) Jones emigrated from the Caribbean to the United States in 1924. Her family settled in the working-class center for Black culture, politics, and activism in New York City: Harlem.⁵⁹ While attending Wadleigh High School, a prestigious all-girls public school, Jones contracted tuberculosis and spent almost a year in a city sanitarium before returning for her senior year. Despite her illness, she emerged as a leader in school activities and Harlem's vibrant activist circles, excelling in her studies and hoping to attend college after graduating in 1935.

A year later, after joining the Young Communist League (YCL) and seeing her first byline in the Communist Party's *Daily Worker*, Jones attended a six-month course at a Communist Party training school in upstate New York. It marked the beginning of her lifelong career as a writer and editor for communist publications, and as a teacher and leader in schools and organizations affiliated with the Party. A national figure by late 1930s, Jones held many leadership roles in the YCL and participated in multiple Popular Front youth organizations, including the American Youth Congress and the Southern Negro Youth Congress. These activities introduced her to a multiracial and cross-gender network of young Popular Front activists attempting to expand the New Deal beyond its liberal priorities to include racial and gender justice.

The government took notice. In the process of complying with a requirement in the Alien Registration Act of 1940 that all non-citizens in the U.S. register with the Immigration and Naturalization Service, Jones included her YCL membership on her request for naturalized U.S.

⁵⁹ For general biographical information, see Sherwood, *Claudia Jones: A Life in Exile*, 20-60; Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx*, 5-27.

citizenship. The government subsequently denied her the U.S. citizenship it granted to her immediate family members.

Undaunted, she served as the YCL's National Education Director and as editor for several Party magazines and journals throughout the 1940s. During World War II, she edited *Spotlight*, a YCL publication that highlighted the youth movement's campaigns for voting rights, desegregation in the military, women's pay equality, and the teaching of Black history, among others. A prolific writer, she authored numerous newspaper stories and columns, political pamphlets, and theoretical essays, including two articles that shaped Party policy and have lasting significance today: "On the Right to Self-Determination for the Negro People in the Black Belt" in 1946 and "An End to the Neglect of the Problems of Negro Women" in 1949. The Popular Front coalitions that she had joined achieved several victories in the postwar period, most notably the Truman Administration's order to end segregation in the armed forces and federal employment in 1948, but she continued to campaign for and write about anti-lynching legislation, women's rights, and other unfinished business into the 1950s.

Jones's organizing and intellectual work led to her arrest in 1948 under the terms of the Immigration Act of 1918—also known as the Alien Anarchists Exclusion Act—which authorized the government's deportation of non-citizen radical activists. She lived under the threat of deportation for the next seven years. While appealing the decision, she continued to write, organize, and teach in New York and across America. As National Secretary of the CPUSA's Women's Commission, for instance, she worked closely with other groups organizing for women's liberation and civil rights, including the Congress of American Women. Two years after her first arrest, the government arrested her again under the Internal Security Act of 1950, and then for a third time in 1951. Convicted of violating the Immigration and Nationality Act of

1952, Jones and many other communists received lengthy prison sentences. The non-citizens among them, Jones included, received deportation orders. In 1955, after serving almost ten months in a West Virginia prison and facing deportation to Trinidad, Jones opted to take advantage of her British citizenship rights, and self-exiled to the United Kingdom.

In 1958, after several years spent establishing a new life in London, Jones founded the *West Indian Gazette and Afro-Asian Caribbean News*, an independent newspaper that made a significant contribution to transnational, anti-racist, and anti-colonial politics in Britain and the West Indies. Attempting to replicate her experiences in Popular Front publications and organizations, she built a network of allies, old and new, to write for the *Gazette* and mobilize for racial and gender equality. She also co-founded several women-led endeavors in London—including the Inter-Racial Friendship Coordinating Committee in 1959, the All Africa Women’s Freedom Movement in 1961, and the Committee of Afro-Asian-Caribbean Organizations in 1963—and met with women’s groups in the USSR, Japan, and China.

In the 1960s, much of her energy focused on Britain’s immigration policies and how they affected Black communities in the U.K. and the West Indies, particularly the Commonwealth Immigration Act of 1962, legislation that she compared to American Jim Crow and South African apartheid systems. In a Movement for Colonial Freedom-led campaign against the law, she collaborated with British and West Indian politicians. In 1963, in one of her last major actions, she organized a demonstration at the American Embassy in solidarity with the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, where Martin Luther King, Jr., whom she had hosted in London in 1961, gave one of his most famous speeches. Shortly after returning from a trip to Japan and China, where she met Chairman Mao, Jones suffered a heart attack. She died in her sleep on Christmas Eve, 1964.

Recent scholarship has recovered Jones's role in twentieth-century intellectual and social movements in the United States and United Kingdom, detailing her influence on the left and its theories and organizations into the 1960s.⁶⁰ These important projects in the fields of transnational Black radicalism, feminism, and anti-imperialism reserve their keenest analysis for Jones's intellectual treatises on race and gender theory published in the 1940s. They make compelling arguments for how she shaped Communist Party policies and theories in the U.S., and anti-racist and anti-colonialist organizations in the U.K.⁶¹

The most comprehensive account of Jones's theoretical work appears in Carole Boyce Davies's intellectual biography, *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones*. Boyce Davies argues that Jones's organizing and theoretical work made her exceptional in the world of American communism.⁶² While her scholarship on Jones is invaluable—she negotiated the transfer of Jones's papers to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture and published the first anthology of Jones's writings—Boyce Davies tilts her analysis far in favor of Jones's feminist theories and offers few details of her networks or organizing activities, particularly during the 1930s and early 1940s. Moreover, she interprets

⁶⁰ See, for example, Wiegand, *Red Feminism*; Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx*; McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*; Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads*; Denise Lynn, "Socialist Feminism and Triple Oppression: Claudia Jones and African American Women in American Communism," *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 8:2 (Fall 2014), 1-20; Kennetta Hammond Perry, *London is the Place for Me: Black Britons, Citizenship, and the Politics of Race* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Lydia Lindsay, "Black Lives Matter: Grace P. Campbell and Claudia Jones—An Analysis of the Negro Question, Self-Determination, Black Belt Thesis," *Africology: The Journal of Pan African Studies* 12:10 (March 2019), 110-143.

⁶¹ Wiegand, *Red Feminism*, 97-113; McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*, 91-125; Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx*, 29-68; Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads*, 68-72.

⁶² Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx*, 18. For additional interpretations of Jones's most influential essays, see Wiegand, *Red Feminism*, 97-113; Balthaser, *Anti-Imperialist Modernism*, 17.

Jones's forced exile from America and her relocation to England as a major break in her politics and personal identity, claiming that Jones developed a new international identity in the U.K. that was more deeply connected to her West Indian heritage.⁶³

While acknowledging that Jones was extraordinary, other scholars insist that she was no exception, playing an integral collaborative role in Black left feminist and communist networks active from the 1930s into the 1960s. Erik McDuffie and Dayo Gore have each written extensively on the American communities in which Jones participated as a Popular Front radical journalist and communist activist, and on how her writings addressed the connections between white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism.⁶⁴ McDuffie includes Jones in his revelatory history of Black radical feminist networks in the Old Left period of American activism. At times, however, McDuffie interprets Jones's support of communist ideals as evidence of her dogmatism, his language echoing Cold War depictions of communists as dupes or fanatics and equating communist theory with the CPUSA's structures and its relationship to the Soviet Union.⁶⁵ He also maps Jones's exile from the U.S. onto a common narrative of the rise and fall of American communism that ends in 1956.

Gore's collective political biography of Black women activists in mid-century leftist and labor organizing demonstrates that those networks flourished in the 1940s and 1950s, laying the groundwork for Black civil rights and gender equality struggles in later decades. Providing

⁶³ Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx*, 137; Boyce Davies, "Deportable Subjects," 949-966.

⁶⁴ McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*, 91-125; Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads*, 46-99.

⁶⁵ McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*, 21, 98. He describes the CPUSA as "grooming [Jones] for leadership," and her autobiography as "[R]eading like a religious conversion narrative, the letter contains a tone of self-righteous certainty in the eventual defeat of capitalism and racism typically embraced by Communist true believers like Jones."

evidence that Cold War anticommunism did not completely decimate the Black left, Gore tells overlapping stories of Black women radicals' participation in a variety of publications, campaigns, and protests. She links Popular Front activism and radicals' intersectional analysis to Cold War and New Left organizing in the 1960s and 1970s to illustrate American communists' lasting contributions to political culture in the twentieth century. Neither McDuffie nor Gore, however, follows Jones once she has left the United States.

Although Boyce Davies dedicates several chapters in her intellectual biography to Jones's post-exile activism—for example, Jones's founding of the *West Indian Gazette* and the Notting Hill Carnival—she does not locate the seeds of these activities in Jones's previous Popular Front activism. Kennetta Hammond Perry's *London is the Place for Me* provides a fuller account of Jones's story after her arrival in London.⁶⁶ It tells the history of Black Britons' postwar efforts to assert their British citizenship rights after the uptick in migration from the Caribbean to Britain, efforts that Black women often led. As Perry illustrates, Jones was an important leader in many of the organizations that mobilized campaigns against anti-Black legislation, police brutality, and racial discrimination in the 1950s and 1960s.

Yet, this collection of important scholarship largely overlooks Jones's leadership in the radical youth movement of the 1930s and 1940s, and fails to examine how her early work as a communist educator in Party schools and editor of YCL publications shaped her theoretical and political priorities, particularly her anti-colonialist and international politics. This dissertation recognizes the similarities in the publications Jones produced in the U.S. and the U.K., particularly their abiding focus on culture and cultural politics, and traces these parallels to

⁶⁶ Kennetta Hammond Perry, "U.S. Negroes, Your Fight is Our Fight": Black Britons and the 1963 March on Washington," in *The Other Special Relationship: Race, Rights, and Riots in Britain and the United States*, edited by Robin Kelley and Stephen Tuck. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015, 7-24; Hammond Perry, *London is the Place for Me*.

Jones's political education in communist theories on the importance of cultural production and self-expression that she learned in the Popular Front period. For decades, Jones had insisted on the importance of telling and teaching narratives of Black history as central to American history and national identity. She believed the same was true of British history and identity. She also remade Popular Front-style coalitions and organizing campaigns to combat attacks on Black Britons' citizenship and civil rights. In this sense, her focus on the Black diaspora in the U.K. was less a new development in her political thinking than the transposition of her already developed Popular Frontism to new ground.

Emma Tenayuca, 1916-1999

Born in 1916 in San Antonio, Emma (Teneyuca)⁶⁷ Tenayuca had deep family roots in Texas. Her maternal relations, descended from Spanish colonists, had lived in the area since the 1800s. Her father's family tree included indigenous Indians and Mexican immigrants. She joined the Communist Party while still a teenager, after city police arrested her for walking picket lines with striking women cigar workers. A stellar student and debate champion, she graduated from high school in 1934 and attended the Mexican government's Workers' University (Universidad Obrera de México) in Mexico City for several months in 1936. Arrested numerous times in the 1930s during strikes and mass protests for jobs and relief for San Antonio's unemployed, she became a national figure for leading one of the nation's largest branches of the communist-

⁶⁷ She was born Teneyuca, but a misspelling on her grade school paperwork changed her name to Tenayuca.

affiliated Workers Alliance of America, the most important organization in the unemployed movement.⁶⁸

Through the Alliance, Tenayuca and a network of radical and progressive activists formed a transnational, multiracial, cross-class coalition that demanded New Deal legislation include women, immigrants, and people of color. The coalition directed campaigns against police brutality, deportations, and discrimination in employment and public services, while securing federal resources for public housing and jobs for Mexican Americans and African Americans. The Alliance's successful mobilizations led to Tenayuca's 1937 trial on charges of assaulting a police officer during a sit-in, and culminated in the 1938 uprising of twenty thousand pecan-sheller strikers and their community allies. The strike made her infamous.

After a violent, mostly Anglo mob shut down the Texas Communist Party's annual statewide convention that Tenayuca helped to organize in San Antonio in 1939, union leaders, employers, and government officials all blacklisted her. The same year, she had published an important theoretical essay in the Communist press (co-written with her husband and fellow communist, Homer Brooks) in which she advocated for full democratic rights for African Americans and Mexican Americans. After Workers Alliance folded in 1941, she tried to sustain her interracial organizing efforts, holding gatherings with oil industry and agricultural workers in other Texas cities and attending Party meetings, but the anticommunist and white supremacist

⁶⁸ For general biographical information on Tenayuca, see Zaragosa Vargas, "Tejana Radical: Emma Tenayuca and the San Antonio Labor Movement during the Great Depression," *Pacific Historical Review* 66 (1997), 553-80; Julia Kirk Blackwelder, "Emma Tenayuca: Vision and Courage," in *The Human Tradition in Texas*, edited by Ty Cashion and Jesus F. de la Teja (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 2001), 191-208; Gabriela González, *Redeeming La Raza: Transborder Modernity, Race, Respectability, and Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 145-166.

backlash took its toll. In 1948, economic necessity forced her to abandon her home state and resettle in San Francisco.

For the next twenty years, she worked intermittently in office jobs, earned a college degree from San Francisco State College, and dreamed of becoming a writer and a teacher. In exile, her political vision still centered on gender and racial equality, and a multiethnic American national identity that valued working-class Mexican Americans' contributions to U.S. history and culture. After returning to San Antonio in 1968, Tenayuca discovered that the Popular Front coalitions she built had continued to organize through the 1950s and 1960s. Despite powerful resistance from conservatives (and sometimes from liberals), activists trained in Popular Front organizations both participated in and inspired new campaigns in Texas's civil rights movement.

Although Tenayuca never again led as she had in the 1930s, choosing instead to fulfill her ambition of teaching in San Antonio's schools, she did reclaim her place as a volunteer for Democratic political campaigns into the 1990s. She also regained her public voice, which she used to praise new generations of grassroots activists mobilizing for justice in Texas's agricultural fields and in San Antonio's working-class African-American and Mexican-American communities. Always outspoken in newspaper interviews, oral histories, and speeches, she was not afraid to criticize conservatives and liberals alike for their lack of commitment to social justice, as well as academics and admirers for failing to recognize Workers Alliance activists' role in the famous pecan-shellers strike. Alzheimer's disease took her out of the public eye for the last few years of her life. Tenayuca died in 1999.

Several historians of the long civil rights movement's origins have included Tenayuca's activism in their discussions of labor, community, and political organizing in Texas from the

1930s to the 1960s.⁶⁹ In *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, Zaragosa Vargas locates the postwar Mexican-American civil rights movement's roots in transnational working-class labor activism during the 1930s and 1940s. Focusing on strikes and organizing campaigns in the American West and Southwest, he highlights the integral roles of activists from the CPUSA and CIO in Mexican Americans' struggles for political, social, and economic rights and reforms. In the absence of their own cross-class national civil rights organization, such as the NAACP, Mexican immigrants and Mexican-American citizens turned to the left-led labor movement, using demands for workers' rights to push simultaneously for equality (racial and ethnic) and full citizenship rights in New Deal legislation and Popular Front politics.

Vargas describes the demands of Mexican-American labor leaders (a number of them communists or socialists) for racial equality and immigrants' rights in union contracts and government policies. He also notes their key cross-border alliances with Mexican radicals who offered assistance during U.S. strikes and demonstrations. Highlighting Mexican-American women's roles as union leaders, rank-and-file strikers, and community organizers, he argues that women provided the backbone of New Deal era labor and civil rights activism, emphasizing their leadership of local campaigns against police brutality, non-citizens' deportations, discrimination in housing and education, and segregation in public facilities.

Although Vargas acknowledges that communists contributed to the important but limited progress Mexican Americans made before 1950—advances that built the foundation for later civil rights successes—he also claims that Mexican Americans in the labor movement paid a high price for associating with the CPUSA.⁷⁰ That association enabled anticommunists, he

⁶⁹ Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 114-157; Krochmal, *Blue Texas*, 21-55.

⁷⁰ Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 147.

suggests, to paint Mexican-American activists as foreign “Reds” and halt the labor movement’s involvement in struggles for Mexican-American civil rights. Vargas contends that the CPUSA leadership’s 1941 policy shift (from prioritizing Popular Front objectives of civil rights to support for the war effort) thus undermined campaigns for equal rights and social justice.

In effect if not in intent, this narrative blames the discriminatory effects of New Deal-era legislation on communists—Tenayuca among them—who never ceased waging grassroots battles to improve that legislation’s benefits for Mexican Americans and other non-white workers and communities. It not only denigrates such activists as Party pawns, but also downplays the deep ties between white supremacy and antiradicalism. It was local and national political and union officials’ white supremacy (often cloaked in the rhetoric of anticommunism) that reinforced systems of discrimination in New Deal and wartime employment, casting Mexican Americans as outside the American polity.

In *Blue Texas*, another study that identifies mid-century civil rights unionism as a seedbed for the long civil rights movement, Max Krochmal examines traditions of multiracial progressive community and labor organizing from the late-1930s to the mid-1960s. Radical and progressive Mexican-American, African-American, and Anglo labor, community, and political activists, he demonstrates, built a fragile but effective Democratic Coalition that sustained multiracial, cross-class collaborations in electoral politics, labor struggles, and civil rights activism in San Antonio, Houston, and other Texas cities. These multiracial alliances achieved some gains in voting rights, especially for African Americans, and ran fruitful campaigns against segregation and economic discrimination across several decades. Their collective actions and mobilizations, such as the 1938 San Antonio’s pecan-shellers’ strike, imprinted a powerful memory on generations of progressive activists who continued to support multiracial organizing.

Krochmal asserts, however, that by the mid-1960s liberal union leaders and civil rights activists had narrowed their ambitions, prioritizing electoral politics over multiracial working-class struggles for liberation.⁷¹ Along with Vargas, he describes Tenayuca's activism in San Antonio in the 1930s and claims that her CPUSA membership destroyed her promising organizing career. They both mark the pecan shellers' strike as a turning point in Texas's labor and civil rights history. Yet neither pays adequate attention to the CPUSA-affiliated Workers Alliance and the radical-led unemployed movement as the foundations for that transformative strike. This dissertation demonstrates that Tenayuca's Alliance was a crucial site of race, class, and gender organizing that provided leadership opportunities for women of color, and trained a generation of activists in Popular Frontist politics.

Ah Quon McElrath, 1915-2008

Born in 1915 to Chinese immigrant parents, Ah Quon (Leong) McElrath grew up poor in Honolulu's working-class neighborhoods. Throughout her teenage years, she excelled at school and worked in industrial pineapple canneries during the summers. She joined the Communist Party and the Inter-Professional Association, a Party-affiliated Popular Front organization, as a college student in the 1930s. At the same time, she began volunteering with Hawai'i's burgeoning labor movement. In 1938, after graduating from the University of Hawai'i, she embarked on a career in social work with the territory's Department of Social Security, commencing what became a lifetime of labor, community, and political organizing in the islands' agricultural and shipping industries and its multiracial communities. In the 1930s and

⁷¹ See the prologue in Krochmal, *Blue Texas*, 1-13.

1940s, she organized her co-workers, as well as Kress five-and-dime store employees, longshoremen and their wives, and pineapple cannery workers.⁷²

Along with a network of radical and progressive women, McElrath played a significant role in the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union's (ILWU) strikes and political battles in the 1940s and 1950s. Her Popular Front vision, grounded in Marxist theory and grassroots activism, led her to organize for union contracts that addressed issues beyond wages and workplace conditions, such as gender pay equity and company housing desegregation. She pressed the government for more expansive New Deal legislation for labor, women's, and immigrants' rights, led community organizing and social welfare efforts during major strikes in 1947 and 1949, and participated in key struggles within the local Democratic Party in 1950.

The Department of Social Security blacklisted her in 1948, and HUAC subpoenaed her in 1950 and 1956. As a leader in the ILWU's Defense Committee during Hawai'i's 1952 Smith Act trial, she supported efforts for the "Hawaii Seven" defendants affiliated with the union and the Communist Party. Despite personal and professional anticommunist attacks, she continued to use her social work training and organizing experiences to build economic and political power for Hawai'i's multiracial working class.

In 1954, the ILWU hired her as its resident social worker. For the next twenty-five years, she had responsibility for education and social welfare programs for the union's tens of thousands of rank-and-file members and their families. Except for a brief time in the mid-

⁷² For general biographical information, see Ah Quon McElrath, "We gave workers a sense of dignity," interview by Judy Yung, reprinted in *Chinese American Voices: From the Gold Rush to the Present*, Judy Yung, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 259-271; A.A. Smyser, "A Lifetime of Laboring to Make Hawaii Better," *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, August 31, 1989; Ah Quon McElrath, "Oral History with Ah Quon McElrath, International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union," interview by Marion Roffman, transcript, University of Michigan, Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations, 1978.

1960s—which she spent in Michigan and Alabama working on a federally funded healthcare project in Lowndes County, one of the civil rights movement’s centers for voter registration battles—she devoted her career to advocating for universal healthcare, affordable housing, and democracy in the workplace and politics. After retiring from the ILWU in 1981, McElrath continued to volunteer full-time in the labor and civil rights movements, making these demands as a public intellectual, appointee to government advisory committees, and founder of progressive organizations until her death in 2008.

Despite their many achievements, McElrath and her network of militant women get short shrift in accounts of mid-century women activists in U.S. labor history, and in analyses of the local labor movement in Hawai’i. Anticommunism and the Cold War’s legacy have often pushed such Popular Fronters to the sidelines in historical narratives of twentieth-century labor and social movements. Dorothy Sue Cobble’s groundbreaking study of a mid-century generation of labor feminists, for instance, centers on women (often anticommunist) left-liberals in Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) unions, but leaves out the communist-led ILWU, which the CIO purged from its federation in 1950.⁷³

The labor feminists featured in Cobble’s history have much in common with McElrath and her network. They wielded significant influence in local and national policies and trade unions by advocating for gender and racial equality in legislation and collective bargaining agreements, and by demanding that economic citizenship rights be extended to those excluded from various New Deal social welfare reforms. As Cobble demonstrates, labor feminists’ vision entwined class, race, and gender politics, and therefore insisted that working-class women’s needs be included in any reform agendas or policy priorities for the labor movement and the

⁷³ Cobble, *The Other Women’s Movement*.

Democratic Party. Yet, there is no place for McElrath or her allies in *The Other Women's Movement*, despite the labor feminist politics of their Popular Frontism, because Cobble does not include the ILWU, or its women leaders, in her study.

In *Fighting in Paradise*, a history of Hawai'i's labor and radical movements, Gerald Horne mentions McElrath when describing the key roles that the Communist Party and ILWU played in Hawai'i's political transformation from a white supremacist oligarchy to a stronghold for the U.S. Democratic Party and progressive legislation.⁷⁴ He devotes the majority of his attention, however, to the men in the ILWU leadership. Women strikers and Women's Auxiliary members rarely appear as powerful figures in his accounts of major labor battles during the 1930s and 1940s. In part this oversight reflects the shortcomings of the union itself. Committed to union democracy, internationalism, and racial equality, the union's communist leaders and allies invested in rank-and-file leadership and political organizing for men. This strategy led to a number of successful strikes and election campaigns, but has drawn attention away from the indispensable participation of women.

The union's victories elicited intense anticommunist responses from employers, as well as from the federal and local governments. Horne demonstrates that the ILWU's opponents used anticommunism to mask the white supremacy at the heart of the American territory's political and economic structures, but that anticommunism did not mute communists and radicals in Hawai'i, as it did on the mainland. Government officials and business owners used HUAC hearings, redbaiting, and blacklisting in attempts to defeat the leftist, multiracial labor movement, but succeeded in dismantling only the Communist Party structures, not the ILWU and its community support. Yet despite his rediscovery of a radical activism that survived

⁷⁴ Horne, *Fighting in Paradise*.

anticommunism, Horne ultimately echoes Cobble's history when describing Hawai'i's shift to liberalism in the postwar period, especially after it became a state in 1959, the moment at which *Fighting in Paradise* ends. Moreover, while McElrath and other women activists pop up in his history, he fails to analyze the role of gender in the making of Hawai'i's working-class, radical politics, and labor movement.

Throughout the twentieth century, McElrath and a multiracial, cross-class network of women shaped Hawai'i's labor movement and democratic politics, organizing for racial equality and equal pay in union contracts and for full citizenship rights for women and people of color in courts and legislation. In contrast to the labor feminists that people Cobble's history, however, McElrath had a broader political vision that recognized the deep connections between anticommunism and white supremacy, as well as the limitations of New Deal policies and politics.

McElrath envisioned state intervention that went beyond demands for public and private regulation of capitalism. She believed that community and union members' full participation in workplace and political democracy was necessary to win, for example, immigrants' rights, free speech protections, and universal healthcare. Inserting Hawai'i's Grassroots Popular Front labor feminists into Cobble's and Horne's narratives illustrates how women led efforts to protect and expand New Deal-era social welfare and labor laws for the islands' multiracial, immigrant working-class. Throughout the twentieth century, McElrath helped secure more expansive social welfare programs—activism made easier because of her job security and institutional support as the ILWU's social worker—and maintained an identity grounded deeply in the working-class, feminist, and anti-racist politics of Popular Frontism.

Interventions and Chapter Summaries

“Red Lives” makes four key interventions in the scholarship on twentieth century social movements. First, it insists on the centrality of anti-racist and feminist organizing to Depression- and World War II-era Popular Front politics and organizations. Second, it challenges common chronologies of American communism’s rise and fall, building on recent work highlighting the survival of radical organizing in the face of anticommunism and white supremacy in postwar politics and the rise of Cold War liberalism. Third, it demonstrates Popular Front communist activists’ legacies in the civil rights and women’s movements from the 1960s to the 1980s. Last, it provides an analysis of radicalism’s ongoing historical erasure by both liberal and right wing anticommunists.

The stories of these Popular Fronters’ lives and labors appears in two parts. The three chapters in Part One trace the respective paths that Jones, Tenayuca, and McElrath took to their Popular Frontism. The chapters highlight their grassroots activities around local issues—efforts that often affected working people’s everyday lives as much as, or more than landmark New Deal battles—and detail their achievements. For residents of Harlem, San Antonio, and Honolulu, local battles *were* the landmarks.

Chapter One chronicles Jones’s trajectory from her early activities in Harlem’s Popular Front youth movement in the mid-1930s to her high profile arrest as a member of the Communist Party’s National Committee in 1948. The Young Communist League and other organizations provided Jones and a network of Black radicals with opportunities to lead campaigns demanding an end to racial and gender job discrimination, police brutality and lynching, segregation, and voting disenfranchisement. Her Popular Frontism took shape within communist-affiliated publications and groups that fostered her career as a writer, editor, teacher, and organizer. The

chapter asserts that, despite ongoing white supremacist and anticommunist attempts to undermine her antiracist and feminist organizing, Jones and the communist youth movement achieved some notable successes in their efforts to extend democratic rights to Black Americans, citizen and non-citizen, through New Deal era programs and policies.

Chapter Two recounts Tenayuca's intellectual and activist route into the leadership of San Antonio's unemployed and labor movements in the 1930s. Finding inspiration in Mexican and American socialist traditions, anarchist literature, and CPUSA-affiliated organizations, she forged a Popular Frontist politics. Her vision of justice extended beyond economic issues to include race and gender equality and immigrants' rights. San Antonio's courtroom battles and mass demonstrations bring into view a Depression-era generation of radicals and progressives, many of them Mexican-American women, who found opportunities through Workers Alliance, radical-led unions, and community organizations to demand full citizenship rights and inclusion in New Deal legislation. The chapter advances the argument that Tenayuca's Popular Frontism and unemployed activism laid the groundwork for the 1938 pecan-shellers strike, a collective action now known as the origin of the modern Mexican-American civil rights movement.

Chapter Three lays out how McElrath's community, school, and work experiences in 1930s and 1940s Honolulu shaped her thinking and activism. Becoming a communist, union activist, and social worker, she formed her Popular Frontism alongside her working-class consciousness through participation in CPUSA-affiliated groups, labor struggles and strikes, and democratic politics. Her leadership in campaigns to organize non-white women workers in pineapple canneries, department stores, and government offices illustrates the opportunities and limitations of New Deal legislation for women and people of color, as well as the possibilities and challenges that labor feminists faced in building gender, race, and cross-class solidarity in

the labor and civil liberties movements. The chapter demonstrates that Popular Fronters provided the foundation for Hawai'i's modern social welfare state and its progressive legislation.

Part Two, comprising Chapters Four, Five, and Six, explores how these women's Popular Frontism shaped their participation in campaigns for economic justice and racial and gender equity in the second half of the twentieth century. Each chapter describes in turn the tribulations of each woman under anticommunist attacks from the state and within their own organizations. These chapters also demonstrate their ways in which their Popular Frontism lived beyond McCarthyism, demonstrating how Jones, Tenayuca, and McElrath influenced the civil rights and women's movements after the 1950s.

Chapter Four concentrates on the organizations, campaigns, and publications in which Jones sustained her radical activism and intellectual work in the 1950s and 1960s. As a participant in transnational groups, such as the Congress of American Women in the U.S. and the Movement for Colonial Freedom in the U.K., she shaped postwar civil rights and anticolonial movements in America and Britain. Her fights to maintain her freedom and avoid deportation—and the public protests that accompanied them—illustrate both the influence of white supremacy and anti-immigrant xenophobia on national politics, and the nationwide support for campaigns demanding full citizenship rights and racial and gender equality in the criminal justice system. The chapter shows that in exile Jones adapted the theories and skills she had developed in the Popular Front to her new endeavors, particularly in the pages of the *West Indian Gazette*, where she again denounced national legislation that undermined Black citizenship rights while amplifying voices from multiracial, cross-class and women-led organizations and celebrating Black history and culture.

Chapter Five clarifies how white supremacy and anticommunism limited opportunities for San Antonio's left-liberal coalition to remake the city's political and labor structures in the 1940s. Cut adrift from any institutional support in the labor movement, Tenayuca nonetheless personified the threat that multiracial, cross-class, and women-led organizing in the Texas borderlands posed to a social order based on Jim Crow segregation, unorganized labor, and patriarchal gender roles. Opponents of New Deal legislation and Popular Front organizations used anticommunism to discredit Tenayuca's demands for race, gender, and class equality in social welfare programs, voting rights, and immigration policies, forcing the charismatic leader from the public sphere for twenty years. During her absence, however, those trained in Popular Front activism continued in their attempts to organize San Antonio's communities and workplaces. Upon her return to her hometown, Tenayuca found new ways to express and advance her Popular Front vision, while academics and activists fashioned her into a civil rights heroine.

Chapter Six describes McElrath's and other Popular Fronters' militancy during postwar ILWU strikes and Democratic Party campaigns, in the face of anticommunist and racist backlash that featured attempts—led by conservative elite and white 'professional' women—to delegitimize demands for immigrants' rights, as well as race and gender equality. Despite remaining outside the bounds of the ILWU's elected leadership, Popular Fronters shaped unions, politics, and the criminal justice system. After Hawai'i achieved statehood in 1959, McElrath prioritized social welfare campaigns to create affordable healthcare, housing, and education through collective bargaining and government legislation. The chapter documents her decades-long social work career and connection to the ILWU, which provided her with an institutional platform as a political activist and public intellectual that neither Tenayuca nor Jones enjoyed.

She used this stage to fight for her Popular Front vision: a multiracial, pro-immigrant, cross-class, and cross-gender movement fighting to secure the promise of equal civil rights and a progressive social welfare state.

The brief Afterword offers a few autobiographical recollections as examples of how Popular Frontism's legacies have manifested in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, and led to the writing of this dissertation. It then revisits how late Cold War and neoliberal prisms have distorted the radical legacies of Jones, Tenayuca, and McElrath. Once infamous "Reds," they are now celebrated in a language of liberalism as feminist and civil rights icons. This makeover of Jones, Tenayuca, and McElrath from derided radicals to civil rights celebrities erases the legacy of their radicalism in renewed demands for political, social, and workers' rights for women, immigrants, and people of color in the modern civil rights, feminist, and labor movements. The Afterword reaffirms those links, and the women themselves as they always remained: grassroots Popular Fronters.

CHAPTER ONE

“Young People are Making Their Voices Heard”: Claudia Jones and the Youth Movement in Harlem

“The rich traditions of the Negro people, in building America to what it is today, the best traditions of Negro culture, their folk art and heroic struggles for emancipation should be familiar to every YCLer and progressive person.”

--Claudia Jones, 1938¹

On July 30, 1938, Claudia Jones and Stretch Johnson, two young Black communists, visited the Bronx office of William T. Andrews, the NAACP lawyer representing their Harlem neighborhood in the New York State Assembly. A newspaper photograph of the public event shows twenty-three-year-old Jones, in an elegant suit and a broad hat festooned with a jaunty bow, leaning over the politician’s left shoulder as he ceremonially writes his name in the American Youth Congress (AYC) Book of International Friendship that the young activists were circulating in New York City.²

Assemblyman Andrews represented Jones in state government, but she could not cast a ballot in his election. She had arrived in Harlem as a young immigrant from Trinidad in 1924 and did not have American citizenship rights. Yet, in the photo, she looks across his desk at a poster with “America Welcomes World Youth Congress” stenciled across a drawing of the Statue of Liberty, and smiles. As a non-citizen, she could not vote, but still she was shaping American political life.

¹ Claudia Jones, “Recent Trends Among Negro Youth,” *Young Communist Review* (July 1938), 17.

² “Assemblyman Supports Youth Congress,” *New York Amsterdam News*, July 30, 1938.

During the summer of 1938, young activists across the United States, many of them foreign-born ‘New Americans,’ collected signatures for the AYC Book as part of a national campaign to raise funds and awareness for the World Youth Congress (WYC) meeting to be held in August at Vassar College, about 75 miles north of Harlem. On behalf of Harlem’s Coordinating Committee for Youth Action, a Popular Front umbrella group of over two hundred organizations, Jones, Johnson, and Dorothy Height, a young progressive Black social worker, solicited signatures for the Book from local politicians and famous figures. By the time WYC delegates from Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America arrived in New York City for the weeklong meeting, American activists had collected over two hundred thousand names, including that of Eleanor Roosevelt, who signed Height’s copy when she visited the First Lady at the Roosevelts’ home in Hyde Park, New York.³

When Jones attended the WYC meeting at Vassar’s campus in Poughkeepsie, New York, she was already a well-known leader in numerous Popular Front youth organizations, including the AYC, the Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC) and the Young Communist League (YCL).⁴ Jones developed her Popular Front politics in an internationalist, cross-class youth movement, alongside other young Black and white activists demanding citizenship, civil liberties, and economic rights during the Great Depression era. Specific campaigns for ending class, race, and gender discrimination in voting, policing, housing, jobs, and education informed

³ “First Lady Greets World Youth Meet,” *Daily Worker*, August 17, 1938; “Mrs. Roosevelt Gives Youth Congress \$100,” *New York Times*, August 10, 1938.

⁴ Claudia Jones, “Ethiopian Aide and Wife Rally Help Here for People,” *Daily Worker*, January 26, 1937; “Mass War urged to end Fascism,” *New York Times*, May 3, 1937; “20,000 Jam Garden at Opening of the Young Communist Convention,” *Daily Worker*, May 4, 1937; “Old Glory, Hammer and Sickle Raised High as Communist Party Marks its 18th Anniversary,” *Daily Worker*, September 15, 1937; Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx*, 75.

Jones's activism and intellectual work in the 1930s and 1940s. So did the violence and the anticommunist attacks that these movements often elicited.

This chapter traces the roots of Jones's Popular Front legacies to her Harlem childhood and her youth activism. Its first half examines how Jones's experiences as an immigrant in a mostly Black but multinational working-class neighborhood shaped her politics. Under threat of deportation and destitution, Jones and her family gained intimate knowledge of both the Great Depression's economic devastation and the political militancy and police repression that erupted on Harlem's streets in response. Race, class, and gender discrimination at school and in her neighborhood's workplaces—as well as the failure of New Deal electoral politics to solve mass unemployment and police brutality—sent Jones looking for more radical ways to understand and affect life under capitalism. The Popular Front youth movement provided opportunities for education, leadership, and a professional career to Jones and other young Black activists, prospects that were few and far between for most working-class Black women of that generation.⁵

The chapter's second half documents how such early radicalization framed Jones's and other young organizers' lasting contributions to Popular Front organizations and their struggles for full citizenship rights, civil liberties legislation, and self-determination for oppressed peoples. From collecting petition signatures at an anti-lynching rally in Times Square in 1939 to leading a delegation to New York's governor in Albany to protest a grand jury's refusal to indict a white police officer in the murder of two Black veterans in 1946, Jones demonstrated, marched, and picketed for civil liberties and democratic rights. Alongside her activism in Popular Front

⁵ For a discussion of Popular Front youth organizations, see Robert Cohen, *When the Old Left Was Young: Student Radicals and America's First Mass Student Movement, 1929-1941* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Denning, *The Cultural Front*; Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*.

campaigns, Jones built a successful career: writing and editing Party publications, including the YCL's wartime magazine, *Spotlight*; and teaching in Party schools and training centers. In 1946, just before her thirtieth birthday, Jones became the youngest member of the *Daily Worker's* editorial board.⁶ In magazine pages, classrooms, and conference halls, Jones expressed her belief that true equality would exist in the United States (and world-wide) only when a coalition of white working-class and Black Americans (including the foreign-born) defeated white supremacy and built a socialist democracy.

By 1948, Jones—whom Elizabeth Gurley Flynn called an “American Communist as a result of American conditions”—had become a high profile writer, journalist, and activist in a circle of influential radical and progressive celebrities, professors, and politicians.⁷ Her professional and political life had begun, however, in Harlem's classrooms and street protests where she first encountered the Popular Front youth movement.

The Making of A New American

Born on February 21, 1915, Claudia (Cumberbatch) Jones was just seven years old when her mother and father left their home in Trinidad, boarding separate ships headed for America. It would be two years before she saw them again. Sybil “Minnie” and Charles Cumberbatch travelled from Port-of-Spain to New York City in April 1922, leaving their four daughters, all under the age of eight, in the care of relatives.⁸ Jones's maternal and paternal extended family

⁶ “Daily Worker Gets New Staff Editor,” *New York Amsterdam News*, January 19, 1946.

⁷ Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, “Justice Department Hits All-Time Low,” *Daily Worker*, January 23, 1948.

⁸ For general biographical information, see Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx*; Minnie Cumberbatch arrived on the *SS Varari* on April 25, 1922; Charles Cumberbatch arrived on the *SS*

had owned land and hotels on the island, but a post-World War I drop in the world market price for Trinidad's major export, cocoa, toppled the economy and compelled her parents to join the tens of thousands of Caribbean migrants who uprooted their lives in the early twentieth century.⁹

A few weeks before her ninth birthday, Jones, her sisters, and a chaperone aunt traced Minnie's and Charles's journeys across the Atlantic. In 1924, after passing the Statue of Liberty in the New York harbor, they stepped off the *SS Voltaire* and onto Ellis Island at the mouth of the Hudson River.¹⁰ The Cumberbatch parents had settled in Harlem, a Manhattan neighborhood north of Central Park and bounded by the Hudson and East Rivers that forty thousand fellow West Indian immigrants came to call home between 1900 and 1930.¹¹

Reunited with her parents, Jones joined a West Indian community on the rise in the face of increasingly restrictive federal immigration law. White supremacy and anti-immigrant fervor bolstered support for the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, which established a new system of quotas based on national origin as a way to reduce "non-white" immigration. The legislation defined Trinidadians, such as the Cumberbatches, as British colonial subjects, and therefore counted immigrants from the island toward Great Britain's allocation, one of the largest under the law.

Vaughn on May 1, 1922; *New York, State and Federal Naturalization Records, 1794-1943*, ancestry.com.

⁹ Claudia Jones, "Autobiographical History," reprinted in Carole Boyce Davies, ed., *Claudia Jones: Beyond Containment, Autobiography, Poetry, Essays*, (Banbury, UK: Ayebia Clark, 2011), 11; Frances Bekele, "The History of Cocoa Production in Trinidad and Tobago," Proceedings of the APASTT Seminar, (Sept 20, 2003), 4. From 1920 to 1921, the price of cocoa on the world market dropped from \$23.90 to \$9.50.

¹⁰ Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx*, xxiv; Johnson, Buzz. *I Think of My Mother: Notes on the Life and Times of Claudia Jones* (London: Karia Press, 1985).

¹¹ For more on Harlem in the 1920s, see Shannon King, *Whose Harlem is this Anyway?: Community Politics and Grassroots Activism during the New Negro Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

Consequently, Harlem's West Indian communities continued to grow, albeit at a slower pace than before the Act's passage.¹²

Like other immigrants who had arrived on America's east and west coasts, crossed its northern and southern borders, or landed in Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and other parts of the U.S. empire before the Johnson-Reed Act's ratification, the Cumberbatch family were not subject to the new quota system. However, the Johnson-Reed Act also allocated new funding and processes for deportations of foreign-born Americans, and twin legislation—the Labor Appropriation Act of 1924—established a new government agency, the U.S. Border Control. The Johnson-Reed Act and other early twentieth-century U.S. immigration legislation illustrate official attempts to consolidate “whiteness” as central to American national identity, and to curtail the constitutional rights and political speech of America's immigrants. Charles and Minnie Cumberbatch lived under the threat of deportation until they could legally naturalize as citizens; any potential mishap or misstep (poverty, illness, applying for state aid, criticizing the government) underscored the possibilities that new policies could come into effect that could send the family back to Trinidad.

The American and British governments' racist immigration policies and their designation of West Indians as colonial subjects had lasting implications for the civil liberties of Jones and other West Indian activists in the U.S. and Britain. As a foreign-born American and as a West

¹² The Johnson-Reed Act tied newly created visa allocations to the U.S. population's demographics in 1890, in an attempt to favor “white” immigrants from Northern and Western Europe. In a response to increased migration from Asia, Southern and Eastern Europe, and Mexico, the government set high quotas for immigrants from Ireland, Germany, and Great Britain and low quotas for other European countries, while essentially banning migration from the parts of Asia and the Pacific that the U.S. had not colonized. For more on immigration law, whiteness, and national belonging, see Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

Indian British subject, Jones spent her life advocating for the expansion and protection of citizenship rights in both countries, and for self-determination for populations in the American and British empires. But from her first step on American soil, Jones herself would be a “deportable subject.”¹³

By 1925, Jones and her family lived in a central Harlem apartment building that directly overlooked St. Nicholas Park to the west, and was a short walk east to Lenox Avenue, a vibrant thoroughfare. Most of their neighbors were Black citizens who earned their living on Pullman trains or in domestic service. Many others had emigrated from the West Indies in the 1910s and 1920s and found work in hotels and laundries. A few were white, the second generation of Irish immigrants, and employed as salesmen or ironworkers.¹⁴

At first, their neighborhood provided new opportunities for Jones’s parents. Her mother found work as a dressmaker, her father as a furrier and as an editor for a West Indian newspaper, until the paper cut its staff during the Great Depression.¹⁵ Jones’s school classmates teased her with “anti-West Indian” taunts, but she later recalled that her father’s “pride and consciousness of our people, of our relation to Africa” fortified her own Black West Indian identity.¹⁶

Charles Cumberbatch was not alone in his Pan-African and Black Nationalist politics. Dotted along a short stretch of Lenox Avenue, not far from the Cumberbatchs’ apartment, sat a

¹³ For more on this concept, see Boyce Davies, “Deportable Subjects,” 949-966.

¹⁴ New York State Archives; Albany, New York; *State Population Census Schedules, 1925*; Election District: 27; Assembly District: 13; City: *New York*; County: *New York*; Page: 26, ancestry.com.

¹⁵ Jones, “Autobiographical History,” 12. Charles Cumberbatch listed his occupation as newspaper editor on his 1936 naturalization papers. *New York, State and Federal Naturalization Records, 1794-1943*, ancestry.com.

¹⁶ Jones, “Autobiographical History,” 11, 12.

number of buildings housing the headquarters of key organizations for New York's Caribbean and African-American communities. The American West Indian Association (AWIA), Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and Communist Party (CPUSA) each provided space for activists, orators, and artists to gather together in central Harlem.¹⁷ "Ubiquitous human voices resounding with varieties of tone, tenor, and political perspective echoed from the streets of Harlem and into the souls of Black folk," writes historian Ula Taylor.¹⁸ Some of these voices belonged to women, most notably Pan-Africanist Amy Ashwood Garvey and communist Grace Campbell, who from atop stepladder soapboxes at the intersection of 135th Street and Lenox Avenue engaged in street corner debates, sold radical newspapers, and persuaded passers-by to join their organizations or attend an event. An important figure in West Indian and anti-colonial politics, Jamaican-born Amy Ashwood Garvey moved between intellectual and political communities in New York, Kingston, and London for decades. In the 1950s, she became Jones's close ally and supporter when they both lived in London.¹⁹

As a teenager, Jones witnessed the plethora of hawkers, political militants, and "street scholars" on the city's sidewalks.²⁰ Perhaps she accompanied her mother on a shopping trip to

¹⁷ Minkah Makalani, "Black Women's Intellectual Labor and the Social Spaces of Black Radical Thought in Harlem," in *Race Capital?: Harlem as Setting and Symbol*, edited by Andrew M. Fearnley and Daniel Matlin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 151; Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth-Century America* (London: Verso, 1998), 185-194.

¹⁸ Ula Taylor, "Street Strollers: Grounding the Theory of Black Women Intellectuals," *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* 30 (July 2006), 155.

¹⁹ For more on Grace Campbell and Amy Ashwood Garvey, see Makalani, "Black Women's Intellectual Labor," 147-153; McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*, Tony Martin, *Amy Ashwood Garvey* (Dover, MA: The Majority Press, 2007).

²⁰ Taylor, "Street Strollers," 155. Taylor defines "street scholars" as "Black folks with a sophisticated level of political consciousness, who have learned from their peers and personal

the local W.H. Kress five-and-dime store or for a cheap lunch at the popular Empire Cafeteria, both a few blocks northeast from their home. Evidence of the Harlem Renaissance was everywhere: bookstore windows advertised Black novelists and poets, and Jazz music blared from radios. Black performers became famous for their acts on the popular Cotton Club's stage, but its audience remained white only. White people commanded not just the seats in famous nightclubs, but most of the skilled jobs in Harlem, especially in its shops and restaurants. Yet, it still offered more opportunities for Black Americans who had migrated north from the Southern states or from the Caribbean Islands than the places they had left behind.

Just before the economic crash that forced Charles Cumberbatch and millions of others out of work, Jones's parents appeared to be fulfilling their "dream of rearing their children in a 'free America,'" as she later wrote.²¹ Both had found jobs, but Minnie Cumberbatch provided the family with political as well as economic stability. In July 1927, she had naturalized as a U.S. citizen.²²

Their dream was short-lived. On November 19, 1928, when Jones was thirteen, her mother died suddenly from spinal meningitis, while at work as a seamstress in a garment factory. Only thirty-seven-years old, Minnie Cumberbatch's death was, in Jones's later words, a result in part of the "conditions of non-union organization...of speed-up, plus the lot of working

experiences rather than from continual formal study and have organized to build a 'counter-hegemonic' movement." In the 1920s, historian Minkah Makalani writes, "even a leisurely stroll along one of Harlem's avenues would bring one into contact with a range of black people, a host of competing political ideals, and a constellation of overlapping, often competing social spaces." Makalani, "Black Women's Intellectual Labor," 146.

²¹ Jones, "Autobiographical History," 11.

²² *New York, State and Federal Naturalization Records, 1794-1943*, ancestry.com.

women...and undoubtedly the weight of immigration to a new land where conditions were far from as promised.”²³

Left alone to raise Jones and his other three daughters, Charles Cumberbatch secured a new job as an apartment building superintendent. He naturalized as a citizen in 1936, a decision inspired perhaps by the New York Home Relief Director’s threat to deport all West Indian ‘aliens’ on the New Deal relief rolls in 1935.²⁴ During the 1940s and 1950s, each of Jones’s sisters also successfully applied for and received naturalized citizenship papers. But the government denied Jones’s application after the Alien Registration Act of 1940 mandated that she list her YCL membership on her government registration forms.²⁵ The government’s denial of her citizenship application would later have dire consequences for her life.

A few months after her mother’s death, Jones had a formative experience in American politics and civic engagement. She and her classmates at Harlem’s all-girls Harriet Beecher Stowe Junior High School participated in a program called “School City,” which the teachers had recently designed to provide “practical experience in self-government” and encourage “self-control and sound judgment among the girls.”²⁶ In a simulacrum of New York City’s

²³ *New York, New York, Extracted Death Index, 1862-1948*, ancestry.com. Jones, “Autobiographical History,” 11. In *Capital*, Marx recounts the story of Mary Anne Walkley, a young dressmaker in London, who died from “long hours of work in an overcrowded work-room” in 1863, see Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 364.

²⁴ “Corsi Charges City Relief is Weakened by Red Tape and Social Service Policy,” *New York Times*, April 25, 1935. Edward Corsi, the Home Relief Director, was a former Immigration Commissioner for Ellis Island.

²⁵ Yvonne Cumberbatch became a naturalized citizen in 1941, Sylvia in 1946, and Lindsay in 1959. *New York, State and Federal Naturalization Records, 1792-1989*, ancestry.com.

²⁶ Thelma E. Berlack, “Irma Minot Elected Mayor of School City of Girls’ Junior High,” *New York Amsterdam News*, January 26, 1927. This article describes the 1927 not the 1928 election, but mentions that it will be an annual event.

government structure, students ran for Mayor, Board of Alderman seats, and Department Commissioner positions. Intended as a lesson in American democracy and citizenship, the School City program instead taught Jones about her teachers' racism and her own ability to build solidarity across perceived racial differences.²⁷

Jones claims in her "Autobiographical History," written in 1955, that her teachers attempted to dissuade her from campaigning for Mayor of School City alongside a Chinese classmate, who was running for President of the Board of Aldermen. She refused the teachers' entreaties, and the slate won. "We were elected by an overwhelming majority of the students," she triumphantly claimed, "proving the teachers wrong and showing the internationalist approach of the student body."²⁸ Throughout her autobiographical statement, addressed to William Z. Foster, CPUSA's General Secretary at the time, she uses personal stories for political ends.²⁹ In recounting her school-age experiences, she illustrates her long commitment to anti-racist campaigns and politics.

This non-white city electoral victory existed only within the school walls until the 1940s in Harlem, but it inspired Jones's ongoing participation in such campaigns for years to come. In 1941, the neighborhood elected New York City's first African-American Councilman, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.. Two years later, Jones's friend and fellow communist Ben Davis ran to replace Powell, with support from such luminaries as Paul Robeson and Langston Hughes. He

²⁷ Jones, "Autobiographical History," 11.

²⁸ Jones, "Autobiographical History," 11; "Harriet Beecher Stowe Junior High Loses 237 Students by Graduation," *New York Amsterdam News*, January 29, 1930. Claude Cumberbatch is listed as a graduate.

²⁹ For a discussion of Communists' memoirs and autobiographies as sources, see James Barrett, "Was the Personal Political?: Reading the Autobiography of American Communism," *IRSH* 53 (2008), 395-423.

won in a landslide, with just over half of his 44,000 votes cast in majority white neighborhoods, his victory proving the power of multiracial, cross-class organizing. Davis won re-election twice, but after his 1949 conviction under the anticommunist Alien Registration Act, the Council unanimously voted to remove him from office.³⁰ Another three decades would pass before Black women and Asian Americans won New York City Council elections.³¹

Jones's defiant commitment to racial justice and solidarity may not have been the type of "practical experience in self-government" her junior high teachers were hoping to instill. Yet, at her graduation, in Jones's telling, they awarded her the school's Theodore Roosevelt Award for Good Citizenship. It was as close to U.S. citizenship as she would ever come.

In February 1930, Jones enrolled at Wadleigh High School, New York's oldest public secondary school for girls. Celebrated at its 1902 opening for its progressive liberal arts curriculum and modern facilities—the building contained the first elevator in the city's public schools—by the 1930s, Wadleigh had earned a reputation "as an academic school preparing girls for college" as the *New York Times* reported.³² Wadleigh provided Jones and other ambitious young women opportunities to study Latin, Greek, or French; to write for the awarding-winning school newspaper, *The Observer*; and to compete in national debate and oratory contests. Jones

³⁰ Horne, *Black Liberation/Red Scare*, 114, 210; "Benjamin J. Davis, 60, is Dead," *New York Times*, Monday, August 24, 1964.

³¹ New Yorkers elected the first the first African-American woman in 1974; the first Chinese-American man in 2001; and the first Chinese-American woman in 2009. See, Thomas Johnson, "Adam Clayton Powell: A Man of Many Roles," *New York Times*, April 5, 1972; Sabrina Tavernise, "Mary Pinkett, First Black Councilwoman, 72," *New York Times*, December 5, 2003; Michelle O'Donnell, "John Chun Lui: Political Trailblazer is Quick to a Microphone," *New York Times*, August 22, 2006; Jennifer 8. Lee, "Victories Across City Resonate in Chinatown," *New York Times*, September 16, 2009 (Margaret Chin).

³² "Wadleigh to Mark 40th Anniversary," *New York Times*, December 5, 1937; Christopher Gray, "Renovating a 1902 Novelty," *New York Times*, September 19, 1993.

reveled in these opportunities. She made the honor roll, joined a number of school organizations, and served as the President of the Spartan Tennis and Social Club.³³

At the same time, race and class discrimination shaped Jones's educational experiences. When Wadleigh first opened at the turn of the century, there were only a few non-white students in each graduating class. Thirty years later, the African-American and West Indian student population had grown to about thirty percent, but its teaching staff remained all white. By 1937, some school officials had begun to worry about the changing demographics in New York City. One retired administrator, who was lobbying for the construction of a new secondary school for girls on Manhattan's Upper West Side, told the *New York Times* that Wadleigh's vicinity in Harlem had become a "neighborhood where gentlewomen do not like to pass."³⁴

As a young woman for whom Wadleigh's neighborhood was home, Jones felt "searing indignation" at her teachers' and classmates' racism. White teachers, she later wrote, would ask Black students if "we wanted to make an extra dollar by doing domestic work for them or as they not-so-quaintly put it, whether I wished to 'wear a pretty white apron' at their own social affairs." White students borrowed her notes in school, but then out in public "would turn their faces the other way under pressure of the Jim Crow society."³⁵ Despite "Jim Crow in the classrooms and in the social life of the school," Jones was intent on following in the footsteps of

³³ Wadleigh High School 1935 year book, Schomburg, NYPL; Federal Bureau of Investigation, Claudia Jones, File Number: 100-72390; Irma Offord, "An Open Letter to the Club World," *The New York Age*, October 21, 1933.

³⁴ "Wadleigh Presses New School Plea," *New York Times*, December 12, 1937.

³⁵ Jones, "Autobiographical History," 12.

previous Wadleigh graduates who had gone on to attend local women's colleges, such as Hunter or Barnard.³⁶

At the beginning of Jones's senior year, however, a personal crisis upended her life. Diagnosed with pulmonary tuberculosis and a collapsed lung, she had to leave Harlem in early fall 1933 to quarantine with over one thousand other patients at Sea View Hospital, a sanitarium on New York's Staten Island that had more convalescents than beds.³⁷ Despite the overcrowded conditions, her recovery gave her months, as she later recalled, to "read avidly," as well as access to "rest, fresh-air, sunshine, and food," according to a *New York Times* report on the hospital's treatment plans.³⁸ She survived the nearly yearlong bout with tuberculosis, but it left her with permanent heart and lung conditions that led to numerous hospital stays throughout her life. Yet she found a silver lining in her sanitarium experience and other lengthy recoveries. "Always derivative from illness is the opportunity for wide reading," she wrote to her friend Stretch Johnson after another lengthy recuperation in the 1950s.³⁹

³⁶ In her later career, Jones worked closely with two Wadleigh alumna from earlier generations: Gene Weltfish, the anthropologist and feminist activist, graduated from Wadleigh in 1919 and from Barnard in 1925, and Vicki Garvin, a labor organizer and Communist Party member who graduated from Wadleigh in 1932 and Hunter College in 1936. E.R. Ship, "Prof. Gene Weltfish Dead at 78; Was a Target of Anti-Red Drives," *New York Times*, August 5, 1980; Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads*, 21.

³⁷ George Soper, "Hospital Crowding Grave City Problem," *New York Times*, July 17, 1932.

³⁸ Jones, "Autobiographical History," 12; "Sea View Hospital Gets Regular Staff," *New York Times*, July 4, 1931.

³⁹ Claudia Jones to Stretch Johnson, April 21, 1956, Howard Stretch Johnson Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University, New York (hereafter HJP). For other correspondence between Jones and Johnson see, Claudia Jones Memorial Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, New York, NY (hereafter CJMC).

Sometime during the last weeks of summer 1934, nineteen-year-old Jones left Sea View, in the middle of the Great Depression's "Revolutionary Season," two years marked by street violence, as workers in the millions went on strike, and millions of the unemployed mobilized for government relief.⁴⁰ With an overwhelming majority of Harlem's residents jobless, the neighborhood erupted daily with protests against evictions, job discrimination, and inadequate relief programs. When she returned home, the picket lines and parades against racism in hiring and unemployment relief, as well as the police violence against protestors, molded her life and politics, propelling her into the Popular Front youth movement.

The Making of a Young Popular Front Communist

By 1934, some of her classmates had joined a burgeoning movement that drew students and young workers into such organizations as the AYC, the YCL, and the Young Liberators, a youth organization with Black and white members dedicated to fighting segregation and discrimination, affiliated with the League of Struggle for Negro Rights. An involved student in and out of the classroom, she picked up where she had left off on account of her illness. Jones was "always in the thick of activities, even as a student leader, when I first met her at Wadleigh," remembered Dorothy Robinson, who worked at Harlem's 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library in the 1930s and later became the branch's first African-American head librarian.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 22.

⁴¹ Madeleine Provinzano, "Claudia Jones: Heroine from Harlem," *Daily World*, February 9, 1974.

Over the course of Jones's delayed senior year, several campaigns and events shaped her political vision. Stories about the Young Liberators' drive against job discrimination and police violence filled the pages of local newspapers and brought hundreds of young people out of classrooms and workplaces into the streets to protest. During 1934 and 1935, the local branches of the YCL and the Young Liberators launched campaigns at the Empire Cafeteria, which hired only whites as countermeasures, and at the local Kress five-and-dime store, as well as other national chains in the neighborhood.⁴²

James Ashford, a young Black communist, led the Empire drive and, at some point in 1934, recruited Claudia Jones into the Young Communist League.⁴³ Born in Arkansas in 1910, Ashford joined the YCL at age twenty-one. He was "dark of skin, dapper of dress, a good dancer, a good pool player, and too much of a ladies' man for his own good," remembered Lloyd Brown, a fellow YCLer.⁴⁴ Charismatic, indefatigable, and battle-tested, he was in Dearborn, Michigan in 1932, when the Unemployed Council and Auto Workers Union led a hunger march to Ford's River Rouge factory, and where YCL leader Joe York and four other protestors died from police gunfire. The Harlem YCL and the Young Liberators grew significantly under his leadership, and, in 1935, he won a national YCL prize for the most successful membership drive.⁴⁵ Flush with triumph, Ashford "recruited more members, collected more money, sold more

⁴² Mark Naison calls the Empire campaign a "landmark in the history of the Harlem Communist Party. Naison, *Communists in Harlem*, 121. For more on the Empire and other campaigns, see Solomon, *The Cry was Unity*; Cheryl Greenberg, *Or Does it Explode?: Black Harlem in the Great Depression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁴³ Johnson, *I Think of My Mother*, 7-9.

⁴⁴ Lloyd L. Brown, "Southern Youth's Heritage," *Freedomways* 4, no. 2 (Spring 1964), 70.

⁴⁵ Lloyd Brown, "James Ashford," *Young Communist Review* (October 1936), 2. For more on James Ashford, see Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 124; Naison, *Communists in Harlem*, 120.

tickets, and got more petition signatures than anyone else.”⁴⁶ Jones would soon rival his achievements.

In September 1934, Ashford and a large group of Black and white demonstrators began picketing daily in front of the Empire Cafeteria, handing out flyers emblazoned with three demands: “Hire additional Negro workers with equal pay, No dismissal of white workers, No reduction of pay.”⁴⁷ On the campaign’s first day, patrolmen had arrested several young communists, but within a week the riot police came out in force. The radical press reported that over fifty patrolmen “launched a savage attack” and “brutally kicked and clubbed” protestors indiscriminately.⁴⁸ The mainstream newspapers described the crowd as a “violent mob” that “stormed” and “besieged” the restaurant until the police forced them to “retreat.”⁴⁹ According to the papers, it was war on the streets of Harlem.

In an example of interracial and cross-class solidarity, however, Ashford and the Young Liberators had earlier convinced the Empire’s white workers to unionize and persuaded many of the cafeteria’s white customers, who were employees at a nearby relief office, to support the

⁴⁶ Brown, “Southern Youth’s Heritage,” 70. Ashford served on the YCL’s National Executive Committee, and spoke at several CPUSA conferences in the early 1930s.

⁴⁷ Greenberg, *Or Does it Explode?*, 131; “Investigation by Mayor’s Committee Gets Under Way,” *New York Age*, April 6, 1935.

⁴⁸ “Negro Woman Badly Clubbed in Cop Attack,” *Daily Worker*, September 11, 1934; James Ashford, “Reign of Terror Met Struggles of White, Negro in Harlem,” *Young Worker*, September 25, 1934. The police arrested Communist Party members Audley Moore, Charles White, Milton Herndon and Leo Seligman.

⁴⁹ “1,500 in Harlem Protest,” *New York Times*, September 1, 1934; “Police Rout Mob of 1,000,” *New York Herald Tribune*, September 1, 1934; “Police Quell Negro Reds,” *New York Times*, September 6, 1934; “1,000 Colored Reds in Riot, Girl Injured,” *Daily News*, September 1, 1934; “Communists Held 125th Street Riot,” *New York Age*, September 8, 1934.

upcoming campaign.⁵⁰ In the face of a boycott and growing public protests, Empire caved. Management committed to hiring three Black men and one Black woman for counter jobs, while the Communist-led Cafeteria Workers' Union pledged to hold Empire to these public promises.⁵¹ The victory that Ashford and other young communists had orchestrated resounded throughout Harlem.

As a high-school student leader, Jones flourished in the city's vibrant intellectual and political culture, but like many young Black Americans she found her dreams of further education and a profession difficult to fulfill. During her last months at Wadleigh—with her father needing help to support her sisters, and her college hopes in question—Jones found a part-time job as a columnist for a local newspaper, possibly the *West Indian American* or a newsletter for the African Patriotic League.⁵² She did not stay in this job, but would shortly find new opportunities with the communist press.

After graduating in early 1935, she worked intermittently in low-wage jobs in a laundry, a nail factory, and several small five-and-dime stores.⁵³ Like other young Black women, she would have found the slightly better paying positions in Harlem's large department stores closed to her. Throughout the 1930s, Harlem's Black activists led "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaigns in attempts to pressure corporate five-and-dime stores, such as Kress and Woolworth's, as well as small businesses, into ending inequitable hiring practices. Protests

⁵⁰ Naison, *Communists in Harlem*, 120.

⁵¹ "125th Street Cafeteria Capitulates to Boycott; Agrees to Hire Negroes," *New York Age*, September 15, 1934.

⁵² Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx*, 75; Federal Bureau of Investigation, Claudia Jones, File Number: 100-72390.

⁵³ Jones, "Autobiographical History," 13.

against race and gender job discrimination, and the white supremacist violence and police brutality that arose in response, radicalized Jones and brought her into contact with young communists such as James Ashford.

The moment of Jones's and Ashford's first meeting is lost to history. Perhaps Jones heard Ashford speak at an Empire protest, or read his articles in the *Young Worker*, *YCL Builder*, or *Harlem Organizer*, newspapers that young communists sold near the public library on the corner of 135th Street and Lenox Avenue.⁵⁴ Or maybe Ashford sought out Jones after reading one of her "Claudia's Comments" columns, or met her at one of the "street corner meetings of various political parties and movements in Harlem" that she mentions attending in her "Autobiographical History."⁵⁵ What we do know is that both Jones and Ashford were ambitious, brilliant, and captivating, and their meeting "oriented" Jones, in her own words, "to work in the youth movements."⁵⁶

After the Empire Cafeteria victory, the YCL and Young Liberator organizers had turned their attention to hiring practices at Harlem's Kress five-and-dime store. They were not alone. The sight of young people picketing outside Kress stores was common in cities across the United States and its territories in the 1930s. Radicals and labor organizers from Seattle to San Francisco

⁵⁴ James Ashford, "Harlem Young Liberators Fight Against the Jim Crow Discrimination on the Job," *Young Worker*, September 11, 1934; Ashford, "Y.C.L. Grows in Recent Struggles," *Harlem Organizer* 1, no. 6 (November 1934); Ashford, "Harlem YCL," *YCL Builder*, 2, no. 4 (May 1936), 7.

⁵⁵ Jones, "Autobiographical History," 13.

⁵⁶ Jones, "Autobiographical History," 14.

to Honolulu picketed and paraded to demand that the company end race and gender discrimination in its hiring and wage policies.⁵⁷

On March 19, 1935, after months of intermittent protests, tensions between police and protestors flared up outside the Kress store. A rumor that store security had detained and beaten a teenager for alleged shoplifting spread through the neighborhood, and a crowd in the thousands formed on Lenox Avenue demanding his release. That evening, a group of Young Liberators staged a multiracial picket line, as the *Daily Worker* reported, “in retaliation against the brutally violent police and against the store owners who practice discrimination.”⁵⁸ The crowd faced hundreds of police officers, many on horseback and armed with “tear gas, revolvers, riot rifles, sub-machine guns.”⁵⁹

The neighborhood’s collective rage over discrimination and unemployment confronted the police officers’ desire to crush the protest, creating a violent confrontation. Some people from the crowd shattered windows and stole merchandise from stores up and down Lenox Ave and West 125th Street. By the next morning, the police had arrested over one hundred demonstrators. Sixteen were later indicted for inciting to riot and anarchy and twenty-five more

⁵⁷ See, for example, “Kress Stores to Hire Utility Clerks, Twenty-four Girls to Get Jobs in So. Cal. Stores,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, June 7, 1934; “Court Orders Union to Halt Picketing at Kress Store,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 17, 1937; “Kress Unionists Fighting Against Wholesale Firing, Discrimination,” *Voice of Labor*, November 10, 1938.

⁵⁸ Oakley Johnson, “The Truth About the Harlem Events of March 19,” *Daily Worker*, March 29, 1935.

⁵⁹ James W. Ford, “Behind Harlem Events—Terrorism, Starvation,” *Daily Worker*, March 21, 1935.

sentenced to time in the workhouse. Police officers shot seven people during the conflict—five died.⁶⁰

The city government and most newspapers blamed Communists. A few days later, in clear violation of property rights and freedom of speech, eight police officers raided the CPUSA's and the Young Liberators' headquarters, both located on Lenox Avenue, where they "smashed the furniture and office equipment," while the City Marshal, ordering the removal of the Young Liberators' "piano, bass drum and chairs," had their office padlocked. Police also arrested for disorderly conduct two young communist women selling the *Daily Worker* on Lenox Avenue.⁶¹

Some dissenting voices identified how city officials and journalists used anticommunism to mask evidence of white supremacy and race discrimination in Harlem business's hiring practices. "To make the Communists the scapegoat for the riot is only to raise a smokescreen calculated to hide the fundamental causes of the outbreak," claimed the Rector of Harlem's St. Martin's Episcopal Church. "What happened was actually an economic revolt. A revolt against the prejudice, exploitation, the unfair practice of many of the stores on 125th."⁶² Many of the neighborhood's residents appeared to agree. In the aftermath of the upheaval and police brutality

⁶⁰ Naison, *Communists in Harlem*, 140; "Negro and White Workers! Unite Against Race Riot Provocation: An Editorial," *Daily Worker*, March 21, 1935; "Riot Deaths Mounting Daily as Fourth Victim Succumbs," *New York Age*, March 30, 1935.

⁶¹ "Police Raid Harlem C.P. Headquarters; New Arrests Made," *Daily Worker*, March 23, 1935; "Extra Police Still on Duty, Many Sentenced to Workhouse Terms," *New York Age*, March 30, 1935.

⁶² "Leaders Comment on Riot," *New York Age*, March 30, 1935.

in March 1935, the Communist Party more than doubled its membership in Harlem, increasing from three hundred to seven hundred.⁶³

These local acts of resistance to racial discrimination and the resultant police violence provided the backdrop to Jones's early radicalism. It took another three years of protests and alliance-building in the broader "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaign before Kress and other chain stores in Harlem signed an agreement to hire Black Americans into "white-collar" jobs as countermen or saleswomen, and even then the companies committed to filling just a third of these jobs with non-white employees.⁶⁴

By the spring of 1936, Jones—still known as Claudia Cumberbatch—had caught the eye of an editor at the *Daily Worker*, which published her first article under her own by-line in March.⁶⁵ The YCL leadership also recommended that she attend the CPUSA's New York Training School, where she later took the name Claudia Jones. Sometime that summer, she again left Harlem, this time by choice. After traveling sixty miles north of Harlem, she arrived at the school near Beacon, New York for a six-month course for YCL members who showed leadership potential. Coming-of-age in the midst of Harlem's mass demonstrations and well versed in radical and Black Nationalist newspapers, she had some knowledge of international politics, New Deal policies, and anticommunist attacks on civil liberties movements before her

⁶³ Horne, *Black Liberation/Red Scare*, 65.

⁶⁴ "Harlem Compact Gives Negroes Third of Jobs in Stores There," *New York Times*, August 8, 1938. The Agreement was negotiated with city government, Chamber of Commerce, and liberal leaders and groups, such as Adam Clayton Powell and the Coordinating Committee for Employment, which represented 200 "Negro" organizations.

⁶⁵ Claudia Cumberbatch, "Negro Congress Youth Aid Domestic Workers," *Daily Worker*, March 30, 1936.

training school experience. Now, as during her stay in Sea View Hospital, she had the opportunity and the time to read.⁶⁶

For Jones, the school provided a theoretical and practical education that she had hoped to find in college, or vocational school. Although she never earned a university degree, nor practiced as a social worker or a doctor as she had dreamed, she honed her journalism, organizing skills, and political theories in communist schools and workplaces. Stretch Johnson, whom she visited when he attended the same school a few summers later, described his time in Beacon as giving him a “sense of both being in on history and having more power even short of a revolution than any of us had dreamed of.”⁶⁷ The CPUSA schools’ reading lists included Marx and Lenin, of course, but in addition to “Science of Society: An Introduction to Marxism,” they offered classes in Black history and culture, the history of trade unions, and “Marxism and the Woman Question.”⁶⁸ For young Black communists this sense of pride formed not just through discussing Marxist theory, but also through witnessing the teachers presenting Black history, culture, and political struggles as central to the American national narrative.

⁶⁶ In her autobiographical history, Jones claims that she attended the CP school in 1937 but it must have been 1936 because newspapers detail her attendance at Party events throughout the months of 1937.

⁶⁷ Howard “Stretch” Johnson and Wendy Johnson, *A Dancer in the Revolution: Stretch Johnson, Harlem Communist at the Cotton Club* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 72.

⁶⁸ For more on CPUSA schools, see Marvin E. Gettleman, “‘No Varsity Teams’: New York’s Jefferson School of Social Science, 1943-1956,” *Science & Society* 66:3 (Fall, 2002), 348; Marvin E. Gettleman, “The Lost World of United States Labor Education: Curricula at East and West Coast Communist Schools, 1944-1957,” in *American Labor and the Cold War: Grassroots Politics and Postwar Political Culture*, edited by Robert W. Cherny, William Issel, and Kieran Walsh Taylor (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2004): 205-215; Weigand, *Red Feminism*, 36-37.

In Jones's Popular Front political education, participation in collective action for liberation and social justice was as important as understanding political theory. The months she spent studying Marxist-Leninist theories on gender and racial oppression, the history of Black freedom struggles, and practical organizing and publication skills provided the foundation for her successful career as a Popular Front leader, journalist, and editor.

After spending six months at the training school, she returned to Harlem eager to organize and put her new skills to good use. James Ashford, however, would no longer be by her side. Like Jones's mother, he had contracted meningitis. He died on September 17, 1936, just twenty-six years old.⁶⁹

Following in his footsteps, Jones went on to lead the YCL's newly renamed Ashford Club branch in Harlem. By the time she became the public face of the Popular Front youth movement in New York and nationwide, she had refined her radicalism through struggle, education, and defiance.

Jones and the Popular Front Youth Movement

On the morning of August 17, 1938 over five hundred World Youth Congress delegates from fifty-four countries boarded a chartered steamboat at the Harlem Pier on West 125th Street and headed up the Hudson River to Poughkeepsie and Vassar College. The young people were "as diverse in language and complexion as America itself," the *Daily Worker* reported.⁷⁰ In New

⁶⁹ "Ashford Dies," *Daily Worker*, September 21, 1936; Lloyd Brown, "James Ashford," *Young Communist Review*, 11, no.2 (October 1936).

⁷⁰ Beth McHenry, "S.S. Robert Fulton Carries a Boatload of History up River," *Daily Worker*, August 17, 1938; Frank Adams, "Mrs Roosevelt Hails World Youth as Best Agents for Peace," *New York Times*, August 17, 1938.

York City and at Vassar, Jones and Dorothy Height, who both represented the AYC at the international conference, had opportunities to meet many of the young activists who had traveled to New York from Asia, Africa, Europe, and South America.⁷¹ Before the weeklong conference began, the All Harlem Youth Congress and other local Popular Front organizations had held welcome activities at Jones's neighborhood YMCA for delegates from Cuba, Haiti, the West Indies, Ethiopia, and Algiers, many of whom were staying at the International House not far from her home on the other side of Morningside Park.⁷²

Throughout that summer, the "America Welcomes World Youth Congress" poster that Jones had brought to her state assemblyman's office lined the windows of college bookstores from Columbia and Barnard uptown to New York University downtown.⁷³ On the eve of the Vassar conference, 20,000 people gathered in Manhattan's Roosevelt Island Stadium for a mass meeting to welcome the international delegates. During the night's entertainment, Federal Theater Project actors performed scenes from the recently famous musical *The Cradle Will Rock*. A hundred college students collectively did the latest dance craze, the Shag, and AYC members held aloft posters with the peace slogan, "We prefer tennis balls, cannon balls don't bounce."⁷⁴

The August meeting also served as the annual conference for the AYC, a Popular Front organization that a coalition of trade unions, church organizations, college students, unemployed

⁷¹ Lindsey, "Black Lives Matter: Grace P. Campbell and Claudia Jones," 121.

⁷² "Harlem's 2 Commerce Associations Plan to Greet Youth Congress," *New York Age*, July 30, 1938.

⁷³ "Youth of World to Convene Here," *New York Times*, August 7, 1938; "Youth Congress to Open Tonight," *New York Times*, August 15, 1938.

⁷⁴ For more on the history and significance of *The Cradle Will Rock*, see Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 285-295; Joseph Starobin, "Hopes and Aims of World Youth Merge at Randall Meet," *Daily Worker*, August 17, 1938.

workers, and leaders from the Socialist Party and the YCL had founded in 1934.⁷⁵ The cross-class, multiracial AYC leadership included Height, who had earned a social work degree from NYU, and working-class young Black people, such as Jones and Johnson who, shut out of university classrooms, studied instead at workers' schools and YCL training centers. "I learned so much from the Communists," Height later stated in an oral history, "Those were some of the best minds that I ever came upon."⁷⁶

For many radicals of the Depression-era generation, the Popular Front youth movement was a key site for cross-class and multiracial political activity, as well as a training ground for the unemployed and labor movements. Founded in 1922, the YCL was not the first radical youth organization in the United States, (the Young People's Socialist League preceded it by fifteen years), but it was certainly one of the biggest of the early civil rights movement. At its height in 1938, the YCL numbered over 20,000 members.⁷⁷ It attracted politically talented and idealistic young men and women from working-class neighborhoods in Harlem and Honolulu, from colleges in California and New York, and from unions in Alabama and Pennsylvania.⁷⁸ Deeply committed to interracial solidarity and gender equality, many young activists forged a Popular

⁷⁵ Cohen, *When the Old Left was Young*, 189.

⁷⁶ Dorothy Height, interview, Black Women Oral Histories Project Transcripts, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

⁷⁷ Isserman, *Which Side Were You On?*, 18. The Young People's Socialist League (SLID) was founded in 1907. For more on the 1930s youth movement in the US, see Cohen, *When the Old Left Was Young*; Britt Haas, "As They Saw the Thirties: Activist Youth's Vision of and for America," (Ph.D. dissertation, State University of New York, Albany, 2011); Patricia S. Nolfi, "Peace, Freedom, and Progress: The American Youth Congress Movement, 1934-1940," (Ph.D. dissertation, State University of New Jersey, Rutgers, 2014).

⁷⁸ For more on the YCL in Alabama, for example, see Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 95.

Front political consciousness in the YCL that often led them into lifelong commitments to the civil liberties and labor movements.⁷⁹

The AYC's leadership wanted to expand the New Deal to include commitments to racial and gender equality in electoral politics, education, and jobs. On behalf of American youth, the AYC's annual platforms demanded abolition of the poll tax and other voting restrictions, condemned police brutality and lynching, and advocated for equal pay and equal education.⁸⁰ At each AYC annual conference in the 1930s, members practiced what they preached, protesting local segregation practices and demanding that the host city's hotels (in New York, Detroit, Cleveland) provide rooms to Black delegates. Given Jones's experiences in Harlem's schools and on its streets, these stated commitments and direct actions against racial and gender discrimination would have resonated with her.

By the time of the WYC meeting at Vassar, the AYC represented over five million young people, and had support from one of America's most famous public figures, Eleanor Roosevelt.⁸¹ From the opening night at Vassar when the First Lady officially welcomed the international delegates over a meal that included corn-on-the-cob and blueberry pie to the last day when the group collectively hammered out the compromises required to pass a series of resolutions, the AYC and WYC delegates discussed issues of unemployment, education, racism, colonialism,

⁷⁹ Carole Boyce Davies describes Jones as a "transnational black radical subject," but does not include the Popular Front youth movement's ideas, networks, and activities in her analysis of Jones's politics. See Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx*, 24.

⁸⁰ American Youth Congress, *Convention Program August 1934* (New York: American Youth Congress, 1934); "Youth Congress Hits Bias, Urges Passage of Anti-lynch Bill," *New York Age*, July 15, 1939.

⁸¹ Haas, "As They Saw the Thirties," 179.

and peace.⁸² In a “spirit of fraternity and collaboration between the youth of all nations,” the delegates passed the “Vassar Peace Pact,” a call to action for young people to “set right injustices against peoples, regardless of race, creed or opinion, [and] to establish political and social justice within our own countries.”⁸³ Reflecting the influences of anti-colonialist young communists, the Pact’s Article IV read, “There can be no permanent peace without justice between nations and within nations, or without their recognition of the right to self-determination of countries and colonies seeking their freedom.”⁸⁴ The right to self-determination would define Jones’s politics and activism in the United States for the next decade.

The WYC and AYC convention of August 1938 “for the first time brought representatives of Negro youth together on a world scale,” Jones reported, “which made the American delegation of Negro youth more conscious as to their responsibilities to the colonial youth of the West Indies and colored youth of India and Africa, who look towards the Negro youth movement in America as their hope and support.”⁸⁵ Within the United States, the Southern Negro Youth Congress brought together young Black activists from the North and the South. Members of SNYC since its first convention in 1937, she and Johnson had envisioned it and other organizations as part of a broad multiracial movement that connected demands for civil

⁸² Frank Adams, “Mrs Roosevelt Hails World Youth as Best Agents for Peace,” *New York Times*, August 17, 1938.

⁸³ Second World Youth Congress, “Resolutions of the Second League of Nations World Youth Congress, Vassar College, August 1938,” reprinted in *The International Law of Youth Rights*, edited by William D. Angel and Jorge Cardona, (Boston: Brill Publishing, 2015), 129, 130.

⁸⁴ Second World Youth Congress, “Resolutions of the Second League of Nations World Youth Congress, 130.

⁸⁵ Claudia Jones, “New Problems of the Negro Youth Movement,” reprinted in *Claudia Jones: Beyond Containment*, 42-50.

liberties in America with struggles for self-determination abroad. The Popular Front youth movement linked a politics that celebrated Black history and culture with direct battles against segregation and colonialism.⁸⁶ These face-to-face connections in the youth movement strengthened Jones's commitment to national liberation and anti-colonialist politics, an allegiance that had its roots in her father's politics, her Marxist-Leninist theoretical training in communist school, and her participation in Popular Front organizations.

“From the heart of the Southland to the industrial North, from the sunny shores of California to the rocky coast of Maine,” Jones wrote in the *Young Communist Review*, “conferences of Negro youth are signs of the times.”⁸⁷ That spring and summer, the All Harlem Youth Congress and SNYC had held meetings that drew hundreds of participants from civil liberties, church, student, and labor groups. She attended the All Harlem Youth gathering, which Height chaired, and helped to bring together representatives from the Youth Council of the National Negro Congress (NNC), youth affiliated with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the YCL's Harlem branches. The All-Harlem delegates passed resolutions on ending discrimination in employment and education (including equal pay for equal work and legal protections for domestic workers) and eliminating mechanisms of disenfranchisement practices, such as poll taxes and literacy tests.⁸⁸

Perhaps with her own “alien” status as a West Indian immigrant and British colonial subject in mind, Jones reported in the communist press that demands for full citizenship rights

⁸⁶ Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 218; McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*, 141-147.

⁸⁷ Claudia Jones, “Recent Trends Among Negro Youth,” *Young Communist Review* (July 1938), 15.

⁸⁸ Naison, *Communists in Harlem*, 201; Jones, “Recent Trends Among Negro Youth,” 16.

for immigrants and American-born youth stood at the center of the All Harlem Youth Congress's agenda. The meeting's attendees defined citizenship not as "formal or by birth alone," she wrote, but as the "devotion to those ideals of democracy on which our country was founded and by which we hope to attain a better life for all the people."⁸⁹

Her vision of national belonging expanded American identity beyond government issued citizenship papers to include the foreign born and any American excluded from the polity by discriminatory legislation or political practices. For Jones, these ideals were enshrined not just in the Constitution, but also in the legacies of Black working-class people's political struggles for liberation and self-determination, and in Popular Front organizing. Working within that vision in Harlem, Jones and Johnson mobilized young activists to participate in protests demanding government action to provide opportunities for jobs and education. Through the All Harlem Youth Congress, they drew a cross-class, multiracial group of college students, actors and musicians, and factory workers.⁹⁰

In October 1938, Jones's face graced the cover of the YCL's *Weekly Review*. For the next few years, she honed her Popular Front politics in the youth movement, and embedded it in everything she did. All the while, she had to navigate the CPUSA's official policy shifts in response to world events (the Hitler-Stalin Pact, then the Nazi invasion of the USSR and the Japanese bombing of Hawai'i's Pearl Harbor), as well as the U.S. government's actions during "Little Red Scare" (House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) hearings and the Alien Registration Act), including the denial of her application for American citizenship.

⁸⁹ Jones, "Recent Trends Among Negro Youth," 16.

⁹⁰ For a full description of the All Harlem Youth Congress's members and activities, see Johnson, *A Dancer in the Revolution*, 67-69.

By 1940, the year she married fellow communist, Abraham Scholnick (whom she divorced in 1947), she was serving as Chair of the YCL's National Council and as the New York State YCL's Education Director.⁹¹ A year later, the YCL's top leadership appointed her National Education Director, and then, in addition to her other duties, as Editor-in-Chief of the YCL's *Weekly Review*. Under her leadership, the *Weekly Review* published articles about the struggles against Jim Crow, book and film reviews (especially by Black writers and artists), and segregation in sports. These positions made her responsible for the materials the YCL distributed at mass rallies, and for the content of its radio programs, magazine publications, and training centers' curriculum.⁹² While she often echoed the Party line—defending in the *Weekly Review* the YCL's new support for the war after the Anglo-Soviet agreement in July 1941, for instance—she and other Popular Fronters in the youth movement also expressed their independence from official dictates at conferences and in print.⁹³

Jones's Wartime and Postwar Anti-Racist, Feminist Organizing and Writings

Throughout the 1940s, Jones used her platform as a national leader of the YCL and as a journalist for communist publications to advocate for voting rights and other civil liberties

⁹¹ Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx*, 52. Jones left almost no evidence about this marriage, beyond her marriage license and divorce papers. Scholnick's parents were Russian immigrants, but he was born in Brooklyn in 1908. Stretch Johnson later claimed that one of the two witnesses at her City Hall ceremony, Dorothy Funn, was an FBI informant. Johnson, *Dancer in the Revolution*, 76.

⁹² Johnson, *Dancer in the Revolution*, 147; Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx*, 77; Johnson, *I think of My Mother*, 9-10. The main publication for the YCL underwent several name changes: *Young Communist Review* (1936-1938); *Weekly Review* (1938-1940); *Clarity* (1940); and *Spotlight* (1943-1945).

⁹³ Isserman, *Which Side Were You On?*, 108, 110.

campaigns, many of which came to be seen as watershed liberal reforms in the 1950s. She worked as a writer and teacher for the *Daily Worker* and for CPUSA journals and schools, and participated in direct actions and mass demonstrations against political repression and police brutality.⁹⁴ While she organized relentlessly to eliminate the obstacles to full social, economic, and political rights—discrimination in housing and education, inequalities in pay and hiring practices, and poll-taxes and white primaries, to name a few—she believed that the difficulties in enforcing civil liberties legislation under imperialist white supremacy and Jim Crow capitalism (often in the face of violence and police brutality) necessitated more than securing democratic rights, or what she called integration, for Black American citizens. It required a re-imagining of American democracy.

After the United States entered World War II in 1941, the CPUSA shifted from embracing struggles for civil liberties to supporting the federal government's war efforts, despite its segregation policies in the military and internment of Japanese Americans.⁹⁵ Young Popular Fronters in SNYC and other organizations had to fight to keep race and gender discrimination at the center of the CPUSA's priorities. In Harlem, the wartime Black Popular Front, however, provided Black radicals like Jones the opportunities to lead campaigns for women's rights, building on networks and communities they had formed in the 1930s.⁹⁶ During the war, Jones's work in communist youth publications, training schools, and organizations allowed her to shape

⁹⁴ For a discussion of Jones's early career in journalism, see Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx*, 69-77.

⁹⁵ For discussions of the CPUSA's official policy shifts from 1939 to 1941, see Isserman, *Which Side Were You On?*, 32-126; McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*, 129-130; Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads*, 36.

⁹⁶ For more on the Black Popular Front in the 1940s, see McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*, 130-137; Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads*, 36-39.

Party discourse, publicize campaigns for voting rights and against racism in the military, and teach Black history and culture. Jones, Johnson, and other young Popular Fronters continued to champion a civil liberties program that included fair employment, racial integration in the military and unions, and desegregation in public services, while facing white supremacy and Jim Crow practices as they traveled to conferences and demonstrations.

“We had many political discussions, furious arguments, most of which she won, and eventually, we wound up in each other’s arms,” Johnson reminisced about Jones during their early days in the YCL.⁹⁷ A well-known figure in Harlem, he had been a dancer at the famed Cotton Club, and played poker with Harlem Renaissance greats Countee Cullen and Claude McKay. After joining the YCL in 1938, he organized in the youth movement alongside Jones for almost two decades. Their romantic relationship did not last, and a few years after the two had met, they each married someone else, but Jones remained close with Johnson and his wife, Martha Sherman. Following in Jones’s footsteps when she took on greater responsibility in national communist projects, Johnson served as Educational Director of the New York YCL and taught in numerous Party training schools throughout the 1940s.

In April 1942, both twenty-eight-years old, Jones and Johnson boarded a train to Birmingham for the fifth annual SNYC conference to be held at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. On that southbound train, a Black porter had to place a required curtain between them and the white passengers in the dining car. On Alabama’s roads they had to pretend to be the new “maid and chauffeur” for the white YCL leader Carl Ross who drove them from the train station to the conference at Tuskegee. Despite the CPUSA’s stated commitment to civil liberties and anti-racism, Jones had to tell Ross not to refer to young Black comrades as “boy” or “kid.”

⁹⁷ Johnson, *A Dancer in the Revolution*, 76.

But the trip had at least one highlight. At an evening concert to cap off the SNYC conference, Jones and Johnson sat among a Black and white crowd listening to Paul Robeson sing. Despite Alabama's Jim Crow laws, he had insisted on appearing before an integrated audience, with no separate entrances for Black and white attendees.⁹⁸

But rising fascism abroad and anticommunism at home would soon interrupt the young activists' plans. Called up in October 1943, almost two years after America entered the war, Johnson traded in his sharp suits for a uniform, completed his basic training on segregated bases in Wyoming and Arizona, and then volunteered for combat duty with other Black "Buffalo Soldiers" in the segregated 92nd Infantry Division. By 1945, he was under artillery fire in Italy.⁹⁹

Meanwhile, Jones had caught the eye of Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) officials, who in 1942 ordered New York agents to make her the subject of a "continuous, active, and vigorous investigation," and recommended that the INS place her on a potential deportation list of "subversives."¹⁰⁰ While Johnson fought fascism abroad (and earned two Purple Hearts), Jones encouraged young people, especially women, to engage in citizenship activities at home, within a state that was crystallizing its case for removing her as a subversive alien.

By 1943, women made up more than half of the Young Communist League's membership, as many YCL men enlisted in the U.S. armed services and deployed overseas.¹⁰¹ That year, Jones led the editorial board for *Spotlight*, a monthly Popular Front magazine that the

⁹⁸ McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*, 126; Johnson, *Dancing in the Revolution*, 85-94.

⁹⁹ Johnson, *A Dancer in the Revolution*, 94.

¹⁰⁰ Federal Bureau of Investigation, Claudia Jones, File Number: 100-72390. She had registered as an alien as mandated by the Alien Registration Act on December 21, 1940 and stated on her form that she was a YCL member.

¹⁰¹ Isserman, *Which Side Were You On?*, 148.

YCL had launched after changing its name to American Youth for Democracy (AYD).¹⁰² The magazine's purpose, as she described it, was to introduce young people to "anti-fascist education and understanding, inter-racial and inter-faith unity, the democratic traditions of our country, [and] a knowledge of American history."¹⁰³ With a look that replicated *Life* magazine's famous bold red banner and full-page cover photographs, *Spotlight*'s front page often featured a movie star or a group of handsome young men in uniform.¹⁰⁴

As illustrations of Jones's wartime Popular Frontism, both her editorship of *Spotlight* and her classes and speeches at labor and workers' schools highlight multiracial community-labor alliances, the importance of electoral politics, women's leadership of campaigns for voting rights and equal pay, and a political education to teach both anti-racism and the course of Black struggle in American history.

Celebrities, politicians, journalists, and activists provided articles and editorial support to Jones's magazine endeavor. Hollywood stars such as Frank Sinatra and Humphrey Bogart appeared on *Spotlight*'s cover, and published articles in its pages. Jazz musician Art Hodes and Broadway actor Canada Lee each contributed columns or featured in photographs of AYD events. The magazine also ran short pieces about elections and legislation by Democratic U.S.

¹⁰² Isserman describes the AYD as a "temporary organizational home for the teenaged children of Communist families," but the activities documented in *Spotlight* provide evidence of a more vibrant organization. Isserman, *Which Side Were You On?*, 179.

¹⁰³ Claudia Jones, "Minutes, Spotlight Editorial Board Meeting," June 1944, James Weldon Johnson Papers, Sp 68 M, Beinecke Library, Yale University (hereafter JWJP). The Young Communist League changed its name to American Youth for Democracy at its 1943 convention. For a history of the AYD, see American Youth for Democracy. *Dust Off Your Dreams: The Story of the American Youth for Democracy*. New York: American Youth for Democracy, 1945.

¹⁰⁴ The James Weldon Johnson Papers at Yale University's Beinecke Library has copies of *Spotlight* issues from 1943 to 1945.

Senators Claude Pepper, a left-liberal from Florida, and Elbert Thomas, an internationalist from Utah. Editorial advice came from well-known journalists Carey McWilliams and Henrietta Buckmaster (who would later become a Congress of American Women national officer) and from YWCA activists Naomi Ellison and Martha Haven Fletcher. As the editor, Jones's photograph appeared on the inside of every cover.¹⁰⁵

In her "From the Editor" column in *Spotlight*, Jones reported on national campaigns for soldiers' absentee voting rights, desegregation and anti-racism in the armed forces, and childcare and equal pay for working women. While the magazine's covers displayed only white faces, almost exclusively male, the interior pages detailed an interracial, women-led youth movement and its organizations, such as the Sweethearts of Servicemen (SOS). Although the SOS's name seemed to reinforce heteronormative femininity, its members were politically active women who campaigned for voting rights and racial equality for the men and women in the armed services.¹⁰⁶ Although as a non-citizen she was still not eligible to vote, Jones had advocated for the lowering of the federal voting age from twenty-one to eighteen, and for the elimination of state poll taxes and other voting restrictions for a number of years.¹⁰⁷

As *Spotlight* reported, the Soldier Voting Act of 1942 had made it easier for the eleven million men in the armed forces and the thousands of women in the Red Cross and other

¹⁰⁵ Frank Sinatra, "Shoo Shoo Maestro," *Spotlight*, March 1944; Humphrey Bogart, "How to Get in Solid with Hitler," *Spotlight*, August 1944; Claude Pepper, "Youth's Candidate," *Spotlight*, October 1944; Elbert Thomas, "What Will our Boys Come Home To?," *Spotlight*, February 1944; Claudia Jones, "Minutes, Spotlight Editorial Board Meeting," June 1944, JWJP, Sp 68 M, BL at Yale.

¹⁰⁶ See, for example, stories and photo collages of SOS activities in *Spotlight*'s February 1944, June 1944, and August 1944 issues.

¹⁰⁷ Johnson, *I think of My Mother*, 11. The federal government did not lower the voting age to 18 until 1971, when Congress approved the 26th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

organizations stationed abroad and over the age of twenty-one to cast an absentee ballot in the federal election. The Act also temporarily eliminated the poll tax and other state voting requirements for all military personnel, but only in elections for federal office, and only during the war.¹⁰⁸ Despite these limitations, the Act provided new possibilities for Black servicemen from southern states to vote.

Throughout 1943 and 1944, SOS and AYD members mobilized to support the renewal of Soldier Voting Act, the permanent elimination of state poll taxes, and the re-election of President Roosevelt. “The existence of poll tax laws, lynchings, and discriminatory practices are shameful blots on our democracy,” Jones had written in 1942, “but the opportunity to fight to abolish these things and to win victories by so doing is a part of our democracy today.”¹⁰⁹ In *Spotlight*, she reported on SOS and AYD activists’ campaigns for the Soldier Voting Act: collecting petition signatures, mailing postcards to Congress, participating in an “emergency conference” with labor union and the Federation of Women’s Clubs, and organizing delegations of Black and white protestors to picket local politicians and the War Department.¹¹⁰ The youth movement’s mobilizing for the Soldiers Voting Act of 1944 helped it pass that April, but the young activists lost the battle to maintain suspension of the poll tax. Southern politicians had demanded the reinstatement of the poll tax, because as one Louisiana Senator stated, “We have got to retain our

¹⁰⁸ Molly Guptill Manning, “Fighting to Lose the Vote: How the Solider Voting Acts of 1942 and 1944 Disenfranchised America's Armed Forces,” (2016), https://digitalcommons.nyls.edu/fac_articles_chapters/1170.

¹⁰⁹ Claudia Jones, *Lift Every Voice – For Victory* (New York: New Age Publishers, 1942).

¹¹⁰ Claudia Jones, “From the Editor,” *Spotlight 2*, no. 1 (January 1944), 2.

constitutional rights to prescribe qualifications of electors...we are bound to maintain white supremacy.”¹¹¹

The AYD and CPUSA went all in for President Roosevelt in the 1944 election, mobilizing with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and its Political Action Committee. In several states, communists helped defeat anticommunist politicians and elect progressives in local primaries, including forcing Texas Congressman Martin Dies of HUAC fame to retire rather than risk defeat. That year also saw participation in the Party reach one of its greatest heights so far, with over one hundred thousand members, of whom almost half were women.¹¹²

In *Spotlight*, Jones focused her readers’ attention not just on desegregation and voting rights legislation, but also on how the military would cope with racism within its ranks. The War Department, for example, had purchased thousands of *The Races of Mankind*, a pamphlet in which anthropologists Gene Weltfish and Ruth Benedict, faculty colleagues at Columbia University, made a scientific case against the notion of biological racial differences and argued that all people are created equal. In an attack on white supremacy, the professors wrote that people’s score on an intelligence test reflected “differences in income, education, cultural advantages, and other opportunities,” not whether the test-takers were Black or white.¹¹³

The pamphlet called on readers to support creation of at least one integrated division of the U.S. Army and the Fair Employment Practice Committee’s work to end job discrimination in

¹¹¹ Manning, “Fighting to Lose the Vote.”

¹¹² Isserman, *Which Side Were You On?*, 212; McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*, 129-130. Dies was re-elected to Congress in 1953.

¹¹³ Ruth Benedict and Gene Weltfish, *The Races of Mankind* (New York: Public Affairs Committee, 1943).

war production factories. The United Service Organizations (USO), however, banned *The Races of Mankind* from all its overseas libraries, claiming it was too “controversial.”¹¹⁴ Accusing the USO of racism, Jones reprinted significant portions of the pamphlet in *Spotlight*’s pages. Weltfish later had to defend her anti-racist writings and ideas under questioning at HUAC hearings, where future presidential candidate Eugene McCarthy took umbrage at her evidence that Blacks in Ohio scored higher on intelligence tests than whites in Arkansas.¹¹⁵

The USO may have banned attempts to teach anti-racism, but the AYD canteens brought Black and white young people together to donate blood for the Red Cross, hold interracial dances, and plan actions to press politicians for government funded childcare nurseries and playgrounds. The AYD youth centers sponsored beauty contests, but the SOS and AYD members also had feminist demands: “if the girls are qualified, they should have the same opportunity as men in keeping their jobs in the plants after the war,” one article declared.¹¹⁶

In an example illustrating how authorities used anticommunism to undermine Popular Fronters’ anti-racism and feminism, the *New York Times* later painted these young activists as “immoral women” in an article that quoted extensively from an undercover FBI agent’s Senate testimony. The agent claimed the Communist Party instructed SOS members “to pick up service men off the streets and bring them to the SOS club rooms where they were given liquor,

¹¹⁴ Claudia Jones, “Controversy or Prejudice?: The USO bans a pamphlet which proves that all men are created equal,” *Spotlight* 2, no. 3 (March 1944), 26.

¹¹⁵ Jones describes this interaction in a pamphlet she wrote in defense of Ben Davis, friend and fellow communist. Claudia Jones, *Ben Davis: Fighter for Freedom* (New York: National Committee to Defend Negro Leadership, 1954), reprinted in *Claudia Jones: Beyond Containment*, 132. For more on Gene Weltfish, see E.R. Shipp, “Prof. Gene Weltfish Dead at 78; Was a Target of Anti-Red Drives,” *New York Times*, August 5, 1980.

¹¹⁶ Hy Turkin, “Cinderellas of the Cinders,” *Spotlight* 2, no. 10 (October 1944), 21.

entertainment, and dancing.”¹¹⁷ What Jones called citizenship activities, the FBI and the *New York Times* essentially likened to prostitution.

But Jones was not just interested in fostering citizenship and equal opportunities for the future; she wanted people to reckon with the past as well. As the YCL’s National Education Director, she recruited students and planned curricula for training centers and workers’ schools that included “courses in American history and a thorough comprehensive course on the Negro question.”¹¹⁸ In Los Angeles, Detroit, and other cities, not-for-profit Party-supported schools offered courses in a multitude of topics—history, social science, art, music, literature, and more—for low tuition fees. The schools often provided scholarships for working-class women and people of color, and, after the war, the G.I. Bill helped offset course costs for veterans, particularly at the California Labor College in San Francisco and New York City’s Jefferson School of Social Science.¹¹⁹

Since her early days in the YCL and SNYC, Jones had advocated for both the teaching of Black history and the hiring of Black teachers in America’s school systems. In the mid-1940s, she held a leadership role at the Institute of Marxist Studies, an offshoot of the Jefferson School of Social Science that was open only to “active workers who passed an admission screening” and offered a 32-week intensive program in Marxist-Leninist theory.¹²⁰ “It is necessary that white

¹¹⁷ John Morris, “Red Push Pictured at Senate Inquiry,” *New York Times*, December 21, 1949.

¹¹⁸ Claudia Jones, “Young Communist League Leader Lauds Workers School Value as Educational,” *Daily Worker*, January 4, 1941.

¹¹⁹ For more on communist affiliated schools in the 1940s, see Gettleman, “The Lost World of United States Labor Education,” 205-215; Gettleman, “No Varsity Teams,” 336-359.

¹²⁰ Claudia Jones, “Young Communist Leader Lauds Workers School”; Gettleman, “No Varsity Teams,” 342.

youth become informed of the struggles of the Negro youth in order to make for the closest cooperation between Negro and white youth organizations,” she had written.¹²¹ A popular lecturer, Jones taught “The Role of the Negro in American Life” at the AYD Leadership Training School in Detroit in 1944 and at the New Jersey Labor School in 1945. She also participated in several symposiums on anti-lynching law and police brutality, anti-colonialism, and women’s oppression, in New York and other states.

In the postwar years, Jones and Stretch Johnson were again working side-by-side in Harlem’s CPUSA headquarters on 125th Street, where they reenergized their recruitment of Party members and participated in local and national campaigns against police brutality (especially against Black veterans). First, however, she and other Black communists had to re-assert the Black struggle as a priority for the Party’s national leadership.

The CPUSA had abandoned the Black Belt Thesis as an official policy in 1944. The Marxist-Leninist theory, which the Comintern issued in 1928, stated that Black inhabitants in the southern United States, particularly in the areas that made up the former Confederacy, constituted a nation, and therefore were entitled to the right of self-determination. Critics of this concept, from both ends of the American political spectrum, portrayed the potential result of such self-determination as a “Soviet Negro Republic” that would force Black migration to a segregated area that had seceded from the United States. As enacted policy, however, the Black Belt Thesis prioritized organizing and recruitment in Black communities, especially but not exclusively in the South, and (at least in theory) advocated that Black Americans should determine their own political futures with access to full citizenship rights.

¹²¹ Jones, “Recent Trends Among Negro Youth,” 17; Jones, “Our Twelve Week Course of Study.”

Party leader Earl Browder had discarded the Black Belt Thesis amidst the war, calling for a united front with liberals and corporate America. He claimed that New Deal legislation and democratic politics offered a more fruitful path for Black civil rights than militant calls for self-determination, as he believed that after the war American communists would have a seat at the table in government.¹²² He was wrong.

In 1946, as Executive Secretary of the CPUSA's National Negro Commission and Negro Affairs editor for *Daily Worker*, Jones took Browder and the national leadership to task for seeing self-determination exclusively in terms of nationalist separatism, and integration (meaning full economic, social, and political equality) only in the realm of civil rights legislation. At a National Negro Commission meeting and in subsequent writings, Jones demanded that the CPUSA return to an emphasis on organizing and theorizing for Black self-determination. She and other Black communist women had interpreted the Black Belt Thesis as a demand for Black liberation and equal rights, as well as access to the full benefits of citizenship, land ownership, and employment as solutions to racial and gender inequality following the restoration of white supremacy after Reconstruction.

Using the right of self-determination as a theoretical underpinning for campaigns against disenfranchisement, lynching, and police violence—to name a few—Jones asserted that civil rights legislation and liberal democratic reforms alone would not free Black people, women, and the working-class from race, gender, and economic oppression. Only when such laws and reforms could be enforced with the support of an interracial, class-based (most likely women-

¹²² In 1928, the USSR's Comintern issued a resolution on the "Negro Question." Harry Haywood, a Black communist from Chicago, co-wrote the Black Belt Thesis, as it was more commonly known. For a discussion of this concept and its history in the CPUSA, see Horne, *Black Liberation/Red Scare*, 66-82, 128, 150-160; McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*, 29-30, 43-44; Gilmore, *Defying Dixie*, 61-66; Higashida, *Black Internationalist Feminism*, 33, 41-44.

led) movement could the United States overcome the legacies of slavery and white supremacy. She defined self-determination as a guiding principle, not an immediate demand, and claimed that grassroots organizing campaigns for civil rights were, in part, an expression of that principle, and a necessary pre-requisite to political autonomy.¹²³

In her essay, “On the Right to Self-Determination for the Negro People in the Black Belt,” published in *Political Affairs* in 1946, Jones argued that the battles for political, social, and economic rights—what she called “democratic integration”—would provide only partial victories. True equality could not exist until a coalition of white working-class and Black Americans transformed white supremacy.¹²⁴ The “source of Negro oppression,” Jones claimed, was a lasting ideology from slavery’s legacy that defined Black Americans in the South as an “internal colony,” and all non-white Americans as permanently outside the imagined American nation.¹²⁵ Echoing her reporting from the World Youth Congress almost a decade earlier, Jones described Black people’s organizing in the context of an anti-imperialist struggle for self-determination, which she believed would eventually lead not to a separate nation but to a multiracial socialist democracy. Black women, she argued, would be key to this transformation.

Jones and other Black communists successfully resurrected the Black Belt Thesis after the war, shifting the CPUSA’s official policies back to including an analysis of race and gender

¹²³ For analyses of Jones’s writings on self-determination and CPUSA policy, see Horne, *Black Liberation/Red Scare*, 179; McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*, 59-61, 164; Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx*, 56; Linn Shapiro, “Red Feminism: American Communism and the Women’s Rights Tradition, 1919-1956,” (Ph.D dissertation, American University, 1996), 275-279; Lindsey, “Black Lives Matter: Grace P. Campbell and Claudia Jones,” 120-122; Higashida, *Black Internationalist Feminism*, 20-22; Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads*, 68-69.

¹²⁴ Claudia Jones, “On the Right to Self-Determination for the Negro People in the Black Belt,” *Political Affairs* 25 (January 1946), reprinted in *Claudia Jones: Beyond Containment*, 60-70.

¹²⁵ Jones, “On the Right to Self-Determination,” 67.

oppression. For the next few years, her grassroots organizing and theoretical writings would underscore her belief that interracial struggles for civil, women's, and workers' rights were not in opposition to the theory of self-determination, but in fact were the only way to win and enforce the full democratic rights necessary for achieving it.

In this vein, building on decades of campaigning to make lynching a federal crime and to hold both police and vigilantes accountable for violence against Black people, Jones and other Popular Fronters renewed their demands for a federal Anti-lynching Bill. From her earliest days as an organizer, Jones had participated in the long tradition of campaigns against police brutality and white violence against Black people in the United States.¹²⁶ In 1939, a newspaper photographer had captured Jones standing in New York City's Times Square on a cold April day, wearing a large "Pass the Anti-Lynch Bill" placard over a heavy winter coat and carrying a clipboard of petition signatures.¹²⁷ A year later, she had described a proposed Anti-lynching Bill as the "touchstone of American democracy" and claimed that "it will require even greater mass support if it is to become law."¹²⁸ Increasingly in the postwar period, however, government officials attempted to undermine anti-lynching and criminal justice advocates by accusing the communists in their midst of stirring up racial tensions.

In February 1946, a white policeman in Freeport, New York, shot and killed brothers Charles and Alfonso Ferguson, two unarmed young Black veterans dressed in their U.S. Army

¹²⁶ See Crystal Feimster, *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

¹²⁷ "Demonstrate for Anti-Lynch Bill," *Daily Worker*, April 4, 1939.

¹²⁸ Claudia Jones, *Jim Crow in Uniform* (New York: New Age Publishers, 1940), reprinted in *Claudia Jones: Beyond Containment*, 31.

and Navy uniforms, and wounded Joseph Ferguson, a third brother also in uniform.¹²⁹ The Ferguson brothers' deaths and the grand jury's swift decision not to indict the policeman sparked local and national protests that connected the events in Freeport to previous examples of injustice for Black Americans, such as the Scottsboro Boys case in Alabama and police brutality during uprisings in Harlem and other cities in the North.¹³⁰

A broad array of communists, politicians, clergy, veterans groups, trade unions, and civil rights leaders from the NAACP and ACLU formed a new Popular Front coalition, the New York Committee for Justice in Freeport. The Committee's members demanded a state investigation into the killings and publicized the realities of racial discrimination in the state. Freeport, for example, had no Black police officers, no Black candidates for the grand jury, no Black teachers, and only one elementary school that accepted Black students. It was also the site of a new housing development for whites only, and a revived chapter of the Ku Klux Klan.¹³¹

On March 15, Jones and New York City Councilman Ben Davis joined 150 demonstrators on a trip to Governor Thomas Dewey's offices in Albany to protest the events in Freeport. The delegation included leaders from the National Negro Congress, the Transport Workers Union, and the New York Committee for Justice in Freeport. Governor Dewey, a Republican whom President Roosevelt had defeated in a landslide in the presidential election of

¹²⁹ Biondi, *To Stand and Fight*, 61. Biondi gives a detailed account of the evening's events and the resulting protest campaign, which she calls the first major case of postwar racial violence.

¹³⁰ For more on the Scottsboro case, see Dan Carter, *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South* (Baton Rouge, LA: University of Louisiana Press, 2007); James Miller, Susan D. Pennybaker, and Eva Rosenhaft, "Mother Ada Wright and the International Campaign to Free the Scottsboro Boys, 1931-1934," *American Historical Review* 106, no. 2 (April 2001), 387-430.

¹³¹ "Policeman Kills 2 Men," *New York Times*, February 7, 1946; "Meeting Here Urges Inquiry in 2 Killings," *New York Times*, April 10, 1946; "Study is Ordered of Negro Deaths," *New York Times*, July 6, 1946.

1944, refused to see them.¹³² When the protests over Freeport made national headlines, however, Dewey recruited a prominent white NAACP lawyer, Lawrence Greenbaum, to lead an investigation into the events.

After three days of public hearings in July, Greenbaum issued a report denying that the case involved “any violation of civil rights” or “discriminatory action.”¹³³ Despite a national outcry and the local demonstrators’ insistence that the inquiry consider the “background details of race relations” in Freeport, the county’s district attorney justified the grand jury’s decision on the grounds that the policeman was in danger from “overpowering, pugnacious, and somewhat intoxicated men,” even though they were unarmed. The district attorney not only defended the white policeman’s actions, but also blamed communists for injecting “unfortunate racial implications into this matter.”¹³⁴

The hearings revealed that the district attorney, as the *New York Times* reported, had “questioned grand jury witnesses about their political affiliations, attempting to impeach their credibility by associating them with radicalism.” Still, Greenbaum ignored the ways in which Freeport officials used anticommunism to undermine struggles for racial justice. In his public report, he put the onus of resolving “racial tension” on Long Island’s segregated communities, concluding that “[E]ach community must by itself work out decent livable relationships among its members, and thereby integrate itself into our American way of life.”¹³⁵

¹³² “Dewey Ducks Delegation on Ferguson Case,” *Chicago Defender*, March 16, 1946.

¹³³ “Freeport Inquiry Closed by Dewey,” *New York Times*, August 4, 1946.

¹³⁴ “Brothers Describe Freeport Shooting,” *New York Times*, July 18, 1946.

¹³⁵ “Freeport Hearing Held ‘Whitewash,’” *New York Times*, July 24, 1946; “Freeport Inquiry Closed by Dewey,” *New York Times*, August 4, 1946.

Jones, like many Black and working-class people, faced significant obstacles to securing a place in the “American way of life” that the NAACP lawyer imagined. As white supremacist violence rose nationwide and attacks on labor rights mounted amidst a postwar strike wave, Jones, Ben Davis, and other activists in Popular Front organizations intensified their work in national campaigns for a federal law against lynching. They also renewed demands for race and gender equality in the criminal justice system, including the right to serve on juries.

In 1946, Jones joined the recently founded Congress of American Women (CAW), which had formed as an offshoot of the Women’s International Democratic Federation and attracted multiracial and cross-class support from the radical and progressive left. In Popular Front fashion, it brought together labor organizers, social reformers, and peace activists. Its cross-class national leadership included Black and white women: journalists such as Jones and Henrietta Buckmaster, communists such as Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and Thyra Edwards, and activist scholars such as Gene Weltfish and Mary van Kleeck.¹³⁶ The CAW’s national platform demanded equal pay for equal work, a federal minimum wage law, national health insurance, affordable childcare, equal access for Black and white women to labor unions and professional schools, and an end to gender and racial discrimination in jury selections.¹³⁷ Racial equality was central to its feminist agenda.

In September, Jones and other CAW activists joined Paul Robeson’s organization, “American Crusade to End Lynching,” which planned a series of mobilizations against lynching

¹³⁶ For more on the Congress of American Women, see Weigand, *Red Feminism*, 46-64; Amy Swerdlow, “The Congress of American Women: Left-Feminist Peace Politics in the Cold War,” in *U.S. History as Women’s History: New Feminist Essays*, edited by Linda Kerber, Alice Kessler-Harris and Kathryn Kish Sklar, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 296-312; Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads*, 59; McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*, 155.

¹³⁷ Swerdlow, “The Congress of American Women,” 304.

and police brutality, and lobbied for a federal anti-lynching law. The campaign attracted Albert Einstein and other famous figures from the science and art worlds, as well as national and local politicians, including Jones's Harlem representative in the New York State Assembly, William T. Andrews. In co-ordination with the "American Crusade," CAW members formed a national anti-lynching committee, proposing a series of local actions for women to support the legislation and protest the crime.¹³⁸ That same month, as Jones reported in the *Daily Worker*, over a thousand delegates, including CAW members, gathered in Washington DC to pressure the federal government to address racial discrimination and white supremacist violence. On behalf of the "American Crusade," Robeson, Einstein, and a small group of politicians gathered in the Oval Office on the anniversary of the first draft of the Emancipation Proclamation to meet with President Truman. The President reportedly asked Robeson if he was a communist and questioned his loyalty to America.¹³⁹

Popular Front organizations that mobilized for civil liberties generated some important federal responses to their demands. In 1946, the Truman administration formed a President's Committee on Civil Rights to investigate and propose legislative solutions to racial discrimination and segregation in the United States, particularly in the Southern states. The committee's report—*To Secure These Rights*, issued in 1947—set forth a number of potentially transformative (but ultimately non-binding) recommendations.¹⁴⁰ In this moment of possibility,

¹³⁸ Weigand, *Red Feminism*, 60.

¹³⁹ Claudia Jones, "Anti-Lynch Crusade Monday," *Daily Worker*, September 22, 1946; Claudia Jones, "The Negro People are Aroused," *Daily Worker*, September 17, 1946; Biondi, *To Stand and Fight*, 69.

¹⁴⁰ United States President's Committee on Civil Rights, *To Secure These Rights: the Report of the President's Committee on Civil Rights* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1947).

To Secure These Rights detailed legislative ways to combat lynching, job discrimination and disenfranchisement, and segregation, such as the elimination of poll taxes and the withholding of federal money from public services in education and housing to force desegregation. It also proposed new oversight mechanisms such as a permanent Civil Rights Commission to oversee voting and other rights.¹⁴¹

But as Jones had written, it would take a mass movement for these legislative proposals to become law, let alone for the secured legislation to be enforced. Nearly two decades passed before a constitutional amendment and Supreme Court decision made poll taxes illegal in the 1960s, and as of this writing, eighty years after Jones first paraded in Times Square with her anti-lynching placard, the U.S. Congress has still not passed a federal law against lynching. Undermining advances made in the 1960s, moreover, the Supreme Court's decision in *Shelby v. Holder* (2013) has opened the door to new mechanisms of disenfranchisement.

Conclusion

Throughout her early career, Jones amplified young Americans' anti-racist and feminist calls on the federal government to legislate desegregation, outlaw discrimination, pass a federal law against lynching, and abolish the poll tax and other forms of disenfranchisement. By the end of 1947, despite claiming some partial but significant victories for civil rights that Popular Front organizations and movements had helped achieve, she knew that progress toward gender, race, and class equality had stalled.

In her Popular Front vision, the freedom to cast a ballot, walk the streets unharmed, and enter with equal rights any neighborhood, workplace, or classroom would not be enough to

¹⁴¹ Biondi, *To Stand and Fight*, 59.

overcome an American national identity that had white supremacy and capitalism entwined at its heart. Like any well-trained Popular Fronter, Jones combined her liberation-focused political education and theories on gender and race oppression with collective action. For almost ten years, in classrooms, editorial pages, and in the streets, she insisted that Black Americans, including those who like her were foreign-born, had been central “in building America to what it is today” and that “full citizenship rights are impossible for all the people if one section of the people are oppressed.”¹⁴²

Jones and other Popular Fronters of the Depression-era generation bore the brunt of the backlash directed at campaigns for civil liberties and economic justice. Her successful career and notoriety as a national leader in Popular Front organizations and radical publications in the 1940s led to greater challenges and dramatic life changes for her in the 1950s. In 1947, the FBI had advised the Department of Justice (DOJ) to consider deportation proceedings against Jones because she was a foreign-born Communist, despite the fact that the government had not yet arrested her, nor convicted her of a crime. When the DOJ declined to follow the FBI’s suggestion, FBI agents turned instead to the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) to make the case for Jones’s expulsion from the U.S.¹⁴³

On January 21, 1948, U.S. government agents arrested thirty-two-year-old Jones at her Harlem home. Almost twenty-five years after her ocean journey from Trinidad to New York, she again sat aboard a vessel headed for Ellis Island. With the Statue of Liberty looming ahead in the

¹⁴² Jones, “Recent Trends Among Negro Youth,” 17.

¹⁴³ Federal Bureau of Investigation, Claudia Jones, File Number: 100-72390.

darkness, she braved the cold January night air and arrived at the INS Detention Center on Ellis Island just before midnight.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁴ “Woman Communist Leader is Arrested for Deportation,” *New York Times*, January 21, 1948; “Seek to Deport Woman Author as an Alien Red,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 21, 1948; “Harlem Woman Arrested in Home as Top ‘Red,’” *Atlanta Daily World*, January 24, 1948.

CHAPTER TWO

“We went through battles here”: Emma Tenayuca and the Unemployed Movement in San Antonio

“I had visions of a huge hall on the West Side, possibly maintained by several unions — pecan, laundry, ironworkers — which would become a center where you would help people become citizens, where you would have classes in English. The union had to serve as a social service organization because of the conditions of the people.”

“But your labor unions in America have not been political enough. Never. The labor organizations here, the whole labor movement, proceeded to organize on a very narrow economic approach.”

--Emma Tenayuca, 1983¹

On July 3, 1937, twenty-year-old Emma Tenayuca walked out of a Texas court on a \$1,200 bond, an amount more than six times the usual bail. She had spent five nights incarcerated in the Bexar County Jail, while a San Antonio judge denied her habeas corpus rights. The county charged her with assaulting a police officer, disturbing the peace, and unlawful assembly for leading a sit-down protest at the local Works Progress Administration (WPA) headquarters a few days earlier. The federal program, which provided government subsidized employment and cash payments to the millions of unemployed workers and impoverished families during the Great Depression, had made cuts to jobs and relief. In response, she and two hundred Mexican, Mexican-American, and Tejano unemployed workers

¹ Rips, “Living History: Emma Tenayuca Tells her Story,” 14.

had occupied the WPA office on June 30, chanting “We Want Jobs” and singing religious and popular songs.²

It would be Tenayuca’s first time on trial, but this was not her first arrest. Beginning in her teenage years, she had played a significant role in the civil liberties, labor, and unemployed movements in San Antonio, and on a national stage. By 1938, she was famous for her leadership in the Communist Party (CPUSA) and Workers Alliance of America (WAA), a radical-led organization for the unemployed. *Time Magazine* called her a “vivacious labor organizer with black eyes and a Red philosophy.”³ A *Saturday Evening Post* article featured a prominent photograph of her, smartly dressed, captured mid-step, and looking straight at the camera, with the caption “The lady with the fighting eyes and stride is La Pasionaria of Texas.”⁴ The *Daily Worker* put a glamor shot of the then twenty-one-year-old on its front page and covered her activities extensively.⁵ She served as the only Tejana (and one of few women) on the WAA Executive Board, and met top Communist leaders, including William Z. Foster, at a CPUSA national convention.⁶

² “Riots Follow Sit-in Strike at WPA; Police do the Rest,” *San Antonio Express News*, June 30, 1937; Robert Warren, “Texas Cops Jail Alliance Members, Wreck Offices,” *Daily Worker*, July 2, 1937; “Alliance Aid Free on Bond; 2 Still Held,” *San Antonio Light*, July 4, 1937.

³ “La Pasionaria,” *Time Magazine* 31, no. 9, February 1938, 19.

⁴ Stanley High, “Who Organized the Unemployed?,” *Saturday Evening Post*, December 10, 1938, 8.

⁵ Esther Canter, “21-Year-Old Girl Leads Texas Pecan Workers,” *Daily Worker*, June 20, 1938. See, for example, *Daily Worker* stories on December 6, 1937, April 26, 1938, and March 8, 1939.

⁶ “Notes on Conversation with Emma Tenayuca,” Ruthe Winegarten Papers, Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin (hereafter RWP); Emma Tenayuca, “Speech to Newspaper Guild Conference,” March 17, 1984, video, Allen Turner Collection, Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas, Austin, TX (hereafter ATC).

A visionary grassroots community and labor organizer, Tenayuca advanced a Popular Front politics that put race, gender, and class at the center of democratic unions and multiracial transnational coalitions for social justice. Although she ran for public office on the Texas CPUSA ticket, served as a Party district secretary, and co-wrote a major policy article published in one of the Party's journals (she also had a brief marriage to the Party's Texas director, Homer Brooks), communism alone did not encompass her radical politics. She drew inspiration not just from American communists but also from Mexican anarchists, Socialist Party activists, and Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) labor leaders.

In her teens, she identified as an anarchist, albeit with organizational tendencies. "I had their ideas," she later recalled, "I felt that the labor movement was the way: you organize the laborers and they'd change the situation."⁷ Later in life, she expressed admiration for a wide circle of radicals, including Elizabeth Gurley Flynn of the IWW and CPUSA; Eugene Debs, the Socialist Party's head in the United States from 1901 to 1924; and Vicente Lombardo Toledano, the Marxist leader of Mexico's labor movement in the 1930s.⁸ Over the years, she identified as a Marxist, a communist, and a democratic socialist, and remained deeply influenced by Mexican leftist politics and transnational solidarity movements.⁹

Tenayuca advanced an unapologetically radical agenda of anti-racism, labor rights, and direct political engagement in her activism in San Antonio. Alongside anarchists, communists,

⁷ Rips, "Living History," 9.

⁸ Tenayuca, interview by Turner, ATC. For more on these figures, see Vapnek, *Elizabeth Gurley Flynn: Modern American Revolutionary*; Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1982); Robert Paul Millon, *Vicente Lombardo Toledano, Mexican Marxist* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1966).

⁹ Jan Jarboe Russell, "The Voice that Shook San Antonio," *Texas Observer: A Journal of Free Voices*, August 20, 1999, 19.

and socialists, she ran one of the United States' largest and most militant WAA branches, which formed the heart of the city's Popular Front labor-left social movement. A national group with numerous local grassroots-led branches, WAA was one of the few organizations during the New Deal that openly advocated for interracial organizing, as well as prioritizing the recruitment and training of women and people of color for its local and national leadership. In addition to lobbying politicians for more resources and planning mass demonstrations, WAA branches performed the role of a trade union for WPA workers and relief recipients.¹⁰ As a community and labor organizer trained in Popular Front politics, she believed in the potential for rank-and-file leadership, especially from women of color, and in the need for the WAA and local unions to organize beyond bread-and-butter workplace issues.

San Antonio's Popular Front coalitions achieved several important, if fragile, victories in the 1930s. In collaboration with Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) unions and civil rights groups, the city's WAA locals mobilized thousands to protest cuts and discrimination in relief policies, demanding that local WPA projects hire Mexican, Mexican-American, and African-American working-class residents from the city's West and East Sides, its poorest neighborhoods. Popular Fronters turned out votes from these communities to help elect Texas New Deal liberal Maury Maverick, an outspoken supporter of civil rights and free speech who brought federal New Deal resources to the city, as a member of the U.S. Congress in 1936 and as

¹⁰ For more on Workers Alliance, see Franklin Folsom, *Impatient Armies of the Poor: The Story of Collective Action by the Unemployed, 1808-1942* (Niwot, CO: University of Colorado Press, 1990), 452-464; Chad Alan Goldberg, "Contesting the Status of Relief Workers during the New Deal: The Workers Alliance of America and the Works Progress Administration, 1935-1941," *Social Science History* 29, no. 3 (Fall 2005), 337-371; Chad Alan Goldberg, *Citizens and Paupers: Reliefs, Rights, and Race from the Freedman's Bureau to Workfare*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

San Antonio's Mayor in 1938.¹¹ Tenayuca and other radical organizers also led major strikes in the garment and pecan industries. Their community and labor organizing formed the foundation for the twenty-thousand strong pecan-shellers' strike in 1938, an uprising now recognized as the beginning of the Mexican-American civil rights movement in Texas.¹²

With a commitment to multiracial leadership and organizing, Popular Front leaders trained a generation of trade union and civil liberties activists to struggle together against white supremacy, training that outlasted the unemployed movement. The local and national responses to San Antonio's Popular Front coalitions exemplify both the level of support that campaigns to extend New Deal rights and resources to women and people of color could elicit from left-liberals, and the ways that the political and business elite successfully used anticommunism and white supremacy to limit radical and left-liberal activists' growing influence. City officials' attempts to quash the unemployed, civil rights, and labor movements with violence, disfranchisement, and arrests exemplify the stiff repression these organizers faced, but also underscore the real threat that their strong transnational and multiracial coalitions posed for San Antonio's political structure.

This chapter shows how a combustible mix of radical theory, mass suffering, and direct collective action sparked Tenayuca's passion for radical labor and community organizing, forming her into an American Popular Front communist and powerful organizer. The chapter's first half documents her early experiences in a multiracial, transnational working-class, and the inspiration she and other young activists in San Antonio gained from multiple radical traditions.

¹¹ For more on Maverick, see Richard Henderson, *Maury Maverick: A Political Biography* (Austin: University of Texas, 1970).

¹² For descriptions of San Antonio's community and labor organizing in the 1930s, see Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 123-143; Krochmal, *Blue Texas*, 21-34; González, *Redeeming La Raza*, 151-157

Her grandfather told her tales about generations of her family encountering Spanish colonialism, American imperialism, Jim Crow racism, and about his own experiences exercising his U.S. citizenship rights and defying white supremacy. From socialist, anarchist, and communist soapbox speakers and teachers in San Antonio's public parks and Mexico City's classrooms, she heard about the legends of the Mexican Revolution, the IWW's free speech battles, and heroic but violent strikes. These are the narratives that shaped her early understandings of national identity and belonging, the significance of electoral politics in a multiracial democracy, and the possibilities for multiracial democracy and transnational solidarity.

The chapter's second half documents Tenayuca's and WAA's achievements as part of San Antonio's Popular Front mass movement, in the face of a local business and political elite growing increasingly concerned about the strength of the unemployed movement and its transnational leftist coalitions. It shows how such coalitions became more combustible as the tension between New Deal left-liberalism and white supremacy tautened, and as federal resources began to dwindle and communities turned to local and state government to demand relief and jobs for the unemployed. It also situates Tenayuca in a working-class intellectual tradition. In the spring of 1939, she described her version of Popular Front politics in "The Mexican Question in the Southwest," an essay co-written with Homer Brooks, her husband at the time, and published in *The Communist*, one of the CPUSA's policy journals.¹³ The essay fused her deep knowledge of Mexican and Mexican-American history with Marxist analysis on anti-imperialism and nationalism. Although this is her only published work, she espoused her ideas about socialism, organizing strategies, electoral politics, and American history in her

¹³ Tenayuca and Brooks, "The Mexican Question in the Southwest," 257-268.

unpublished diaries and oral histories. In the 1970s and 1980s, friends, family, and historians, alike, often commented on her penchant for giving them lists of books to read.¹⁴

A mobilized West Side community, federal and international investigations of city policies, and violence in city streets across America during a wave of strikes provided the backdrop to her activism and theories. Battles between the local government and Popular Front groups occurred steadily in the 1930s, setting the stage for her trial, the twenty-thousand pecan-shellers' strike, and an Anglo riot outside an interracial CPUSA meeting.

"I am an American"

Born in San Antonio on December 21, 1916, to Benita Hernandez Zepeda and Sam Teneyuca¹⁵—parents of Mexican, Spanish, and Indigenous heritage—Tenayuca and her maternal family could trace their Texas origins back to the eighteenth century. “You have been here a long time,” her grandfather, Frank Zepeda, told her when she was a child, “You have deeper roots than the Anglos.”¹⁶

Her parents and grandparents were all born in or near San Antonio, making her a third generation Tejana. Later in life, she would lay claim to her family's long history in America *and* make common cause with newly arrived Mexican immigrants in her essay “The Mexican Question in the Southwest,” in which she asserted, “[T]he Spanish-speaking population of the

¹⁴ Interview with Sharyll Teneyuca, by the author, July 2018.

¹⁵ As a child, Emma Tenayuca began to spell her last name differently than the one on her birth certificate (Teneyuca) because of an early spelling error on her school records. Birth Certificate, Box 7, Folder 1, MSS 420, ETP at TWU.

¹⁶ Quoted in Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 125.

Southwest, both the American-born and the foreign-born, are one people.” “The Mexican population of the Southwest is closely bound together by historical, political and cultural ties.”¹⁷

By the time she was school age, San Antonio was the most populous city in Texas and housed some of the worst slums in the United States. In the 1930s, the city’s Mexican, Mexican-American, and Tejano community—the second largest in the United States, after Los Angeles—constituted 40 percent of the city’s population while African Americans made up just below 10 percent.¹⁸ Jim Crow economic and political systems ensured that most non-Anglos (almost half the population) were disfranchised and discriminated against in segregated spaces and in hiring, especially for craft and white-collar jobs.

The Great Depression’s early years hit Tenayuca’s parents hard. With their small dairy farm on the South Side struggling, they sent teenage Emma, along with one of her ten siblings, to live with her maternal grandparents.¹⁹ Frank Zepeda would become a lasting influence on her life and politics. In 1952, she named her newborn child Francisco, after his great-grandfather. Until his death in the mid-1930s, Zepeda worked as a skilled carpenter in a lumberyard, a craft that had provided enough funds to buy a small house for him and his wife, Margarite, on Arbor Place

¹⁷ Tenayuca and Brooks, “The Mexican Question in the Southwest,” 258; *1920 United States Federal Census* [database on-line], Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc., 2002; *1930 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc., 2002.

¹⁸ Julia Kirk Blackwelder, *Women of the Depression: Caste and Culture in San Antonio, 1929-1939* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1984), 13-14; Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 129.

¹⁹ Tenayuca, interview by Turner, ATC. According to Tenayuca, her parents owned cows and chickens, and sold milk and eggs.

close to San Antonio's West Side.²⁰ Tenayuca spent most of her childhood in this working-class community, on a street with Black, Mexican-American, and Mexican and European immigrant neighbors.

“There was always some talk of politics at my grandmother's,” she recalled in an interview in 1987, in which she described her grandfather as a “devout Catholic, a good democrat” and “a man who did something...he took an interest in politics and civil rights.”²¹ As U.S. citizens, the men—and after 1918 the women—in her family routinely exercised their right to vote. Her father, Sam, once told her that in the Presidential election of 1912, he voted for the Socialist Party candidate, Eugene Debs (whom she later pronounced to be “one of the best speakers, a wonderful man”).²² He was not the only Texan to do so: Debs won 8.5% of the vote in the state.²³ In the Governor's race of 1924, her grandfather “rallied the entire Zepeda clan to go forth” and vote for Miriam “Ma” Ferguson because she had taken a “strong stand against the Ku Klux Klan,” a brave action in San Antonio where the Klan had a fervent following.²⁴ Four

²⁰ Tenayuca, interview by Jerry Poyo, February 21, 1987, transcript, Institute of Texan Cultures Oral History Program, Libraries Special Collections, University of Texas at San Antonio, Texas (hereafter ITC); *1930 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc., 2002.

²¹ Tenayuca, interview by Poyo, ITC. Tenayuca began to attend a Catholic church again once she returned to San Antonio in the 1960s. Vargas claims that Zepeda's Catholicism was a key influence on Tenayuca. See, Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 124.

²² Tenayuca, “Speech to the Newspaper Guild,” ATC.

²³ Don Carleton, *Red Scare!: Right-wing Hysteria, Fifties Fanaticism, and Their Legacy in Texas* (Austin, TX: Texas Monthly Press, 1985), 26.

²⁴ Tenayuca, interview by Poyo, ITC; Alicia Schmidt Camacho, *Migrant Imaginaries: Latino Cultural Politics in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 49; González, *Redeeming La Raza*, 147.

years later, her family voted for Democratic Presidential candidate and Catholic Al Smith, then still a champion of poor immigrants.²⁵

The Zepeda and Teneyuca [sic] family's level of political engagement, however, was becoming an increasingly rare privilege for non-Anglos in Texas. By the 1930s, only about six percent of San Antonio's approximately 125,000 Mexican and Mexican-American residents were eligible to vote. Mandatory poll taxes, residency requirements, and a 1921 state law requiring citizenship for foreign-born voters (stripping them of a right in place since 1869) had disfranchised the rest. In the city's Jim Crow racial structure, her family's designation as free U.S.-born whites, as well as their ability to pay the mandatory poll taxes (the Zepeda men continued to find work as carpenters in a local mill, although sporadically during the worst years of the Depression), gave them voting rights in Texas's "white primaries."²⁶

Her family's stories and political activity instilled in her a commitment to local and national electoral politics that never wavered. In "The Mexican Question in the Southwest," she called for the removal of all restrictions (residence qualifications, poll taxes, white primaries) to citizens' legal right to vote, and advocated for an easier pathway to citizenship for immigrants. She also connected the near total absence of Mexican Americans elected to local and state

²⁵ Rips, "Living History," 8.

²⁶ White primaries disenfranchised Black Americans in Texas and other states until 1944 when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled the practice illegal. See Judith Kaaz Doyle, "Maury Maverick and Racial Politics in San Antonio, Texas, 1938-1941," *Journal of Southern History* 53, no. 2 (May 1987), 198; Thomas A. Guglielmo, "Fighting for Caucasian Rights: Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and the Transnational Struggle for Civil Rights in World War II Texas," *Journal of American History* 92, no. 4 (March 2006), 1216.

government to the “poor health conditions and lack of educational facilities” in Texas.²⁷ During the height of her fame as a communist organizer, she ran for U.S. Congress on the Party ticket, but she never actively campaigned and received fewer than a hundred votes.²⁸ Much later in life, she canvassed her San Antonio neighborhood for Democrats Ann Richards and her former high school classmate, Henry González, in statewide elections.

Tenayuca’s multiracial, working-class neighborhood, especially its schools and public spaces, shaped her expansive definition of American identity as inclusive of citizens and non-citizens, immigrants and indigenous, the colonizers and colonized who had roots in Europe, Africa, and Latin America.²⁹ She embraced the multiplicities that shifting national boundaries and her family’s heritage created, but she often found herself betwixt and between communities as she confronted systems of power in San Antonio in the 1930s.

A lifelong advocate for bilingual education and school curricula that included Mexican and Mexican-American history and culture, she grew up speaking English as her first language and Spanish as her second. The Spanish she learned from her grandparents was, in her words, an “archaic Spanish, from the Conquistadores,” leading both Anglo schoolteachers and non-Anglo community members to criticize her, as her Spanish was neither textbook proper nor Tejano or

²⁷ Tenayuca and Brooks, “The Mexican Question in the Southwest,” 261. In 1938, only two Mexican Americans served in the Texas House of Representatives, both were wealthy landowners from Brownsville and one was a founder of LULAC.

²⁸ Ruth Cowen, “Miss Jeannette Rankin, First Woman Elected to Congress, Leads 30 of her Sex in Campaigning for National Offices,” *Washington Post*, November 3, 1940. The Communist Party ran two women for the U.S. Senate, and four women for the U.S. Congress in the 1940 election.

²⁹ Scholars have aptly defined Tenayuca’s identity as “mestiza” and “continental,” and portrayed her as simultaneously a citizen and a “colonial subject.” See, for example, Camacho, *Migrant Imaginaries*, 49; Balthaser, *Anti-Imperialist Modernism*, 27; Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 124.

Mexican colloquial.³⁰ She later claimed that she started to study Spanish during a cigar workers strike in the mid-1930s, so that she could communicate better with Mexican women workers on the picket lines and create flyers in Spanish for the strikers.³¹ In the 1930s, she advocated that public schools should provide an equally bilingual education in cities and states where Spanish-speakers made up a majority of the population, and successfully petitioned the WPA to support literacy classes in Spanish at the WAA office.³² Her desire to master the language stuck with her, and in 1954, she eventually earned a college degree in Spanish and bilingual education.

As a child, on Sunday afternoons, Tenayuca often accompanied her grandfather on a walk from their church, St. Agnes, to Plaza del Zacate, a popular public square now called Milam Park.³³ Traipsing down Arbor Place, she may have called out greetings to her neighbors in one of the city's few multiracial areas: 'Ciao' to the Italian and Spanish Bogiorno and Pizzini families; 'Guten Tag' to the matriarch who spoke only German; 'Hello' to the Robertsons and the Hewses, Black families who lived on both sides of the train tracks that crossed her street.³⁴

When she and her grandfather arrived at the park, he would often buy her an ice cream—a small luxury purchased despite the total loss of his savings in 1932—as they wandered around

³⁰ Tenayuca relates several stories about her 'bad' Spanish in interviews and speeches. See, Tenayuca, interview by Turner, ATC; Tenayuca, interview by Poyo, ITC; Tenayuca, "Speech to Newspaper Guild," ATC.

³¹ Tenayuca, interview by Turner, ATC.

³² Tenayuca and Brooks, "The Mexican Question in the Southwest," 264.

³³ Tenayuca, interview by Poyo, ITC.

³⁴ Tenayuca, interview by Poyo, ITC; Emma Tenayuca, interview by Luis R. Torres, 21 February 1987, video, José Angel Gutiérrez Papers, Special Collections, University of Texas at San Antonio (hereafter JAGP); *1920 United States Federal Census* [database on-line], Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc., 2002; *1930 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc., 2002.

listening to the park's many soapbox speakers.³⁵ "There was always someone at the Plaza making a speech or talking, or discussing the latest papers," she later recalled.³⁶ Radicals from both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border orated from the edges of the square hoping to inspire, incite, or just inform San Antonians on the news of the day. She would have heard, for example, anarchists reading aloud from the latest issue of the Mexican Flores Magón brothers' newspaper, *Regeneración*, or socialists railing against the poll tax that disenfranchised many non-Anglo citizens.³⁷

Tenayuca felt the "sting of racism and discrimination" in her Jim Crow city but she found inspiration in the stories of resistance to white supremacy she heard from her family and from activists in the Plaza. Some of her earliest expressions of radicalism were assertions of anti-racism's legitimacy in American political identity. Eager to stake her own claim to American identity and fights against discrimination, she joined the Women's Auxiliary of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) in 1931. "I am an American," she declared in a speech to her Auxiliary chapter that year.³⁸ Alongside other young LULAC activists, she protested local schools and restaurants that refused to admit or serve Mexicans and Mexican Americans.³⁹ She soon discerned, however, that her own emergent vision of a multiracial and multinational American identity conflicted with LULAC's more restrictive membership policies,

³⁵ Tenayuca, interview by Poyo, ITC.

³⁶ Tenayuca, interview by Turner, ATC.

³⁷ González, *Redeeming La Raza*, 147.

³⁸ González, *Redeeming La Raza*, 148.

³⁹ Emma Tenayuca, "A Link with the Past, A Challenge for the Future," unpublished manuscript, Box 10, Folder 2, MSS 420, Emma Tenayuca Papers, The Woman's Collection, Texas Women's University, Denton, TX (hereafter ETP); Tenayuca, interview by Emilio Zamora, ETP at TWU.

which denied full membership to women and non-citizens.⁴⁰ She quit LULAC, but not organizing. She went in search of a different path to social justice.

“It was a protest movement of the youth,” Tenayuca recalled of her high school friends whom the local police called the “Who-Gives-A-Damn Club,” a nickname that the activists then claimed as their own.⁴¹ She joined the Young Communist League (YCL) in 1935, but her political affiliations were wide-ranging. “I read all about the Wobblies, and in my mind I also became an anarchist.”⁴² The YCL had a number of members in San Antonio, including her classmates Nathan Kleban, the editor of the award-winning school newspaper who later ran for Texas Attorney General on the CPUSA ticket, and Peggy Vance, a close friend, who became a journalist and labor leader in the American Newspaper Guild.⁴³ The young radicals discussed economic theory and protest novels (such as works by Émile Zola), and published a youth newspaper together.⁴⁴

In high school, she also found some sympathetic adults, such as her English teacher who, in Tenayuca’s words, had “the mind of a Thomas Paine” and was “a non-conformist, but never a

⁴⁰ Cynthia E. Orozco, *No Mexicans, Women or Dogs Allowed: The Rise of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2009), 214.

⁴¹ Tenayuca, “A Link with the Past,” MSS 420, EPT at TWU

⁴² Roberto R. Calderon and Emilio Zamora, “Manuela Solis and Emma Tenayuca: A Tribute,” in *Chicana Voices: Intersections of Race, Class, Gender*, eds. Theresa Cordova, et al (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), 41; González, *Redeeming La Raza*, 151.

⁴³ U.S Congress, House Committee on Un-American Activities, Investigation of Un-American Propaganda Activities in the United States, Hearings, House of Representatives, 75th Congress, 1939, 5553; Carleton, *Red Scare!*, 29; Ben Levin to Emma Tenayuca, December 15, 1986, Box 4, Folder 35, MSS 420, ETP at TWU; Tenayuca, October 13, 1948, Diary, Box 2, MSS 420, ETP at TWU.

⁴⁴ Rips, “Living History,” 8; Tenayuca, “A Link with the Past,” MSS 420, ETP at TWU; Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 125.

Communist” (anticommunist city officials still fired this “moderate liberal” in the 1940s).⁴⁵ As in Plaza del Zacate, she found common cause with fellow anarchist, socialist, and communist students, but she also found her own voice. As a high school debate champion, she discovered her “great oratorical ability,” as her debate coach described her gift for public speaking, a talent that served her well on picket lines and at rallies over the next few years.⁴⁶ One of her fellow debate team members wrote to Tenayuca many years later: “I sensed even then that you were destined for other things than the wife-mother homemaker life. You were a little fire-eater.”⁴⁷

The Making of a Young Communist

Despite her talents and intellect, Tenayuca, like many young people of the Depression generation, could neither afford college tuition nor find a steady job after her high school graduation. Yet in the midst of the nation’s economic collapse and her own financial insecurity, she witnessed glimmers of political possibility across the border. In Mexico, leftist Lázaro Cárdenas won the country’s presidential election in 1934, and launched a radical program of nationalization, land redistribution, and labor rights. The Texas business and political Anglo elite nervously watched the events in Mexico, but she remembered that Cárdenas’ victory created a “surge of nationalism and pride among Texas Mexicans” and introduced new opportunities for transnational labor solidarity in San Antonio.⁴⁸ Closer to home, meanwhile, voters in San

⁴⁵ Tenayuca, October 13, 1948, Diary, MSS 420, ETP at TWU.

⁴⁶ “Mexican Girl uses Talents in WPA Fight,” *San Antonio Light*, February 21, 1937; Tenayuca Correspondence File, High School Yearbooks, Box 7, Folder 11, MSS 420, ETP at TWU.

⁴⁷ Ben Levin to Emma Tenayuca, December 15, 1986, Box 4, Folder 35, MSS 420, ETP at TWU.

⁴⁸ Tenayuca, “A Link with the Past,” MSS 420, ETP at TWU.

Antonio's Bexar County elected Maury Maverick to the U.S. Congress, a victory that would help secure millions of federal dollars from the WPA for the city and its surrounding area.

In 1935, Tenayuca and the Who-Gives-A-Damn crew joined women strikers from the Finck Cigar Company on one of the many picket lines that popped up outside San Antonio's cigar-making factories and clothing sweatshops during the 1930s.⁴⁹ Representing the city's largest employer in the mid-1930s, Finck's management fired hundreds of striking Mexican, Mexican-American, and Tejana women during a two-year battle over wages and injustice for cigar rollers. "They are Reds," a Finck spokesman announced, in defense of the company's refusal to rehire the workers despite a Regional Labor Board ruling in their favor.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, the city's police chief publicly threatened the strikers, approving his officers' violence and their arrests of many workers and their allies during the conflict, including teenage Tenayuca. The backlash to the "protest movement of the young" came quickly. "After some American Legionnaires came to give our organization the once over," she recounted in 1983, the Who-Give-a-Damn Club "folded up shortly."⁵¹

The vigilante and police violence, however, did not deter her. "When the police charged the picket line, I was arrested," she later recalled, "and I think from that moment on, I was ready to die for the cause of labor."⁵² This definitive moment of collective action and repression made

⁴⁹ "Women Battle Officers at San Antonio," *Austin American Statesman*, March 16, 1935; "61 Cigar Strike Fighters Held," *Austin American Statesman*, March 24, 1935; Blackwelder, "Emma Tenayuca," 195-197.

⁵⁰ Quoted in Blackwelder, *Women of the Depression*, 134.

⁵¹ Rips, "Living History," 9; Esther Canter, "21-Year-Old Girl Leads Texas Pecan Workers," *Daily Worker*, June 20, 1938.

⁵² Tenayuca, "Speech to the Newspaper Guild," ATC.

her a radical trade unionist, setting her on a collision course with San Antonio's anti-radical, anti-labor, anti-immigrant political and business elite, and on occasion racist labor leaders. She helped form a number of International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) locals in the city's garment factories, but she clashed repeatedly with the union's Anglo leader, Rebecca Taylor, who disparaged Mexican and Mexican-American workers and aligned herself with the police during the later pecan-shellshers' strike.⁵³

In 1935, the CPUSA opened its Texas headquarters in Houston, and Tenayuca began serving as Secretary for San Antonio's West Side Unemployed Council (UC), which joined Texas branches in Port Arthur, Laredo, and Houston.⁵⁴ As part of the wave of hunger marches, sit-ins, and mass demonstrations during the Great Depression, she and the San Antonio UC staged protests at the local WPA offices and lobbied city and state government officials. These actions and the UC's commitment to recruiting women and people of color as leaders gave her and other radical women the chance to raise their voices in resistance to white supremacy and anti-immigrant policies.

In the early years of the Great Depression, the UC's leaders and grassroots members mobilized in towns and cities across America to demand federal funding for relief and jobs for the country's millions of unemployed. From Harlem to Birmingham, from Los Angeles to Louisville, communists and other radicals led unemployed campaigns and demonstrations for

⁵³ Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 129.

⁵⁴ *Red Trade Unionist*, vol. 1, No. 2 (December 1935), Labor Movement in Texas Collection, Barker History Center, University of Texas at Austin; Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 129.

more government resources, and for civil liberties and labor rights.⁵⁵ Founded in 1930, two years before Franklin Delano Roosevelt's election and three before any New Deal legislation, the UC officially opposed discrimination against people of color and the foreign-born in government policies, and encouraged the creation of interracial chapters in hopes of building solidarity and a multiracial working-class consciousness. The UC's radical leadership envisioned an interracial and pro-labor unemployed movement that, through collective action, could effectively demand equal treatment in relief offices, workplaces, and government legislation.⁵⁶ "We build a movement that demands rights and begs no favors; that does not plead but fights," read the national UC Constitution, "that does not expect miracles but realizes that gains are made through struggle, effort, and sacrifice."⁵⁷

Local CPUSA and UC leaders noticed Tenayuca's militancy on the Finck picket lines and in UC protests for jobs and relief, and sponsored her political education across the border. In the fall of 1936, she spent two months in Mexico City, studying at Marxist labor leader Vicente Lombardo Toledano's Universidad Obrera de Mexico (UOM). The UOM expanded access to education for Mexico's working class, and its curriculum included courses in economic theory, labor history, and union organizing strategies. It offered places to non-Spanish and Spanish

⁵⁵ There is no full-length history of the unemployed movement and its organizations, but local and state branches appear in key studies of US radical and labor organizing. See, for example, Naison, *Communists in Harlem*; Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*; Storch, *Red Chicago*.

⁵⁶ For histories of the Unemployed Council, see Daniel Leab, "United We Eat: The Creation and Organization of the Unemployed Councils in 1930," *Labor History* (Fall 1967), 300-315; Roy Rosenzweig, "Organizing the Unemployed: The Early Years of the Great Depression," *Radical America X* (1976), 37-60; Folsom, *Impatient Armies of the Poor*, 452-464.

⁵⁷ Quoted in Leab, "United We Eat," 309.

speaking students from around the world with the intention of teaching young radicals about the Mexican political revolution and forging international solidarity between activists.⁵⁸

Radical activists and labor organizers routinely crossed the border in both directions, especially after the founding of the Confederacion de Trabajadores de Mexico (CTM) in 1936. Mexican communists traveled to Texas for agricultural and oil industry labor conventions; American communists journeyed to Mexico City to meet with CTM leaders or enroll at Toledano's UOM.⁵⁹ The Mexican Communist Party and the CTM forged links with left-led unions and other progressive organizations in the United States, especially in the Southwest. The CTM, in particular, had a deep influence on the left-led CIO movement. Tenayuca remembers that many of San Antonio's workers wanted to join Mexican labor unions.⁶⁰

Although she recalls that she "was very young and my Spanish was not very good" during her two months at UOM, she nevertheless formed long-lasting memories of the people she encountered and the books she read. She enrolled in a Labor Law course taught by Alejandro Carrillo, Secretary of UOM and Toledano's close associate in the CTM. She also admired the work of IWW anarchist and Columbia University professor Frank Tannenbaum, who wrote a history of the Mexican labor movement.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Millon, *Vicente Lombardo Toledano*, 132, 123; Gigi Peterson, "Grassroots Good Neighbors: Connections between Mexican and U.S. Labor and Civil Rights Activists, 1936-1945," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Washington, 1998), 141; González, *Redeeming La Raza*, 148.

⁵⁹ Millon, *Vicente Lombardo Toledano*, 132, 123.

⁶⁰ Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 4; Tenayuca, interview by Zamora, MSS 420, ETP at TWU.

⁶¹ Tenayuca, interview by Zamora, MSS 420, ETP at TWU; Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 119.

In December 1936, she returned home to San Antonio, where, despite the growing anticommunist repression of civil liberties and workers' rights, she jumped back into the labor and unemployed movements' activities. She gave public talks on the lessons she learned in Mexico City, and described her ambitions for organizing in her hometown. "Hay mucho que hacer," she told *La Prensa*, a Spanish-language newspaper in San Antonio, "hay cosas interesantisimas como las 'juveniles' y la industria de la 'nuez' y la ayuda a miles de obreros carentes de trabajo."⁶² For the better part of the next decade, she focused on building a career as a grassroots organizer and national leader in Popular Front organizations. Education and teaching—political and bilingual—remained central to her professional plans.

During trips to Plaza del Zacate as a teenager, Tenayuca may have seen IWW Wobblies handing out copies of *The Rip Tide* or communists reading from the *Red Trade Unionist* (edited by Homer Brooks, whom she married in 1937 when she was twenty-one), radical newsletters both published in nearby Houston in the mid-1930s.⁶³ She may even have tried to sell subscriptions to her own "Who-Gives-a-Damn" radical youth paper, or stood on a soapbox to share some of the knowledge she had learned on San Antonio's picket lines and in Mexico City's classrooms.

⁶² Enrique Ortega, "Emma Tenayuca, lider obrera santanoniana, refiere lo que observe en su viaje a Mexico," *La Prensa*, December 10, 1936. Translation: There is much to do, there are very interesting things like the 'youth' and the 'nut' industry and helping thousands of workers without work.

⁶³ *The Rip Tide*, June 10, 1935, Marine Transport Workers Union, IWW, Box 2E308, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, Barker History Center, University of Texas at Austin; *Red Trade Unionist*, vol. 1, No. 2 (December 1935), Labor Movement in Texas Collection, Barker History Center, University of Texas at Austin; George Norris Green with Michael R. Boston Jr., "Looking for Lefty: Liberal/Left Activism and Texas Labor, 1920s-1960s," in *Texas Left: The Radical Roots of Lone Star Liberalism*, edited by David O'Donald Cullen and Kyle Grant Wilkison (Texas A&M University Press, 2010), 119.

Fifty years later, she still admired the Wobblies and the Communists. As she told a friend in the 1980s, the IWW was a “wonderful movement, it had its own philosophy, literature, poems, songs; they believed in One Big Union and the general strike.”⁶⁴ Her memories of the communists at the forefront of the civil liberties and labor struggles in San Antonio bear little resemblance to popular culture’s images of CPUSA members as dupes and traitors. “The idea of sharing, of helping, this was brought into the Communist movement,” she recounted in a 1983 interview.⁶⁵ As she struggled to both theorize and fight capitalism and white supremacy, the stories of radicalism and injustice she had heard at UOM and in Plaza del Zacate stayed with her.

Frank Zepeda died on May 1, 1936, just before his granddaughter’s trip to Mexico and the launch of her career in San Antonio’s Popular Front unemployed and labor movements. Within a few months, Tenayuca would become a main attraction in the city’s public spaces during WAA demonstrations. Zepeda never saw the huge crowds, among whom he would have stood, gathered to hear her speak. In St. Agnes Church, he had heeded the priest’s moral lessons; in his home, he had spoken up in support of voting rights and against racism; in the Plaza, he had listened to the Magonistas and the Wobblies. And so had Emma.

By 1936, Tenayuca, just twenty years old, was already a popular speaker and the public face of the unemployed and labor movements, seeding radical dissent into the unfolding of the New Deal in San Antonio. After attending the Universidad Obrera de Mexico and proving her skills in the Unemployed Council, Tenayuca found more leadership opportunities when the UC and rival national unemployed organizations merged into the WAA, or Alianza Obrera, as Spanish-speaking San Antonians called it. The UC’s and WAA’s commitments to racial, gender,

⁶⁴ “Emma Tenayuca, Notes” July 3, 1981, RWP.

⁶⁵ Rips, “Living History,” 13.

and economic justice, as well as direct action, resonated with Tenayuca. They echoed her grandfather's teaching on racial equality and her own experiences reading about and listening to radical theories and activists in San Antonio and Mexico City.

Tenayuca and the Popular Front Unemployment Movement

On July 13, 1937, on the first afternoon of her two-day trial, Tenayuca sat in the San Antonio courthouse's witness stand, wearing a short sleeved, button-down dress, her hands clasped in her lap. She faced the possibility of a four-year prison sentence, and an all-Anglo jury of six men—two federal civil service employees, two farmers, a grocery clerk, and a machinist.⁶⁶ In the heat of the crowded room, a hundred Mexican, Mexican-American, and Tejano supporters had occupied all available chairs. Twenty-five Anglo police officers and another dozen deputy sheriffs, hired as security for the trial, stood around the room's edges. That morning, they had escorted an overflow of an additional hundred WAA members and allies into the outer corridor, where they eagerly awaited news of her testimony and the court's verdict.⁶⁷

Tensions had been brewing between Tenayuca and the city's officials for some time. San Antonio's Popular Front had begun in the local unemployed movement and its branches of radical-led national organizations, the Unemployed Council and Workers Alliance. Since her first arrest on the Finck cigar factory picket line two years earlier, she had continuously demanded that the New Deal's legislation and programs be extended to the city's non-Anglo workers and unemployed, especially women. As a leader in the UC and the WAA, her earliest organizing attempts in the labor and unemployed movements were firmly grounded in anti-racist

⁶⁶ "Girl Named as Inciter of Riot," *San Antonio Light*, July 13, 1937.

⁶⁷ "Girl Accused of Causing Near Riot," *San Antonio Light*, July 13, 1937.

and anti-sexist labor politics, putting her in direct conflict with officials upholding the city's Jim Crow political and economic structures.

Already among the lowest paid workers in the United States, San Antonio's women of color had few or no protections under federal labor law, as the New Deal's policies on wage codes and labor rights excluded domestic and agricultural workers. Only a trickle of the federal WPA dollars flowing into Bexar County made it to San Antonio's West Side and East Side neighborhoods, or to its Mexican, Mexican-American and African-American workers; the government mapped its WPA projects onto the city's segregated and unequal labor markets.⁶⁸ "The peach jobs," Tenayuca later recalled, the "ones coated with cream" went to the American Federation of Labor (AFL) unions and white male industrial workers.⁶⁹

The few WPA assignments intended for women—in music, arts and education—went mostly to Anglo applicants, while the authorities shunted non-Anglos into the lowest paid and least stable positions, often in canning factories or industrial sewing rooms.⁷⁰ After the Finck management fired a number of its striking cigar workers, Tenayuca accompanied them to one of the state-run WPA offices in San Antonio. There she hoped to secure government funded jobs for the now unemployed cigar workers, but she discovered that the WPA officials provided few opportunities for non-Anglos. She turned instead to the San Antonio's branch of the communist-led Unemployed Council.

⁶⁸ For a discussion of San Antonio's labor structures, see Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 127; Blackwelder, *Women of the Depression*.

⁶⁹ Tenayuca, interview by Zamora, MSS 420, ETP at TWU.

⁷⁰ Blackwelder, *Women of the Depression*, 67.

“We would take those who just came in from outside San Antonio to the WPA. We took Mexicans who couldn’t speak English to the relief office,” she remembered. “If they didn’t get what they wanted we would return.”⁷¹ Tenayuca’s grassroots organizing model depended on labor-community alliances, and collective demonstrations. As leaders and members in the UC, non-Anglo women and some Anglo allies learned how to recruit new leaders in their neighborhoods, plan and mobilize for direct actions, speak out at protests, and hold authorities accountable for fair distribution of the millions of federal dollars Texas received for jobs and relief.⁷² Their demands went beyond equal wages and shorter workweeks to include free lunches and supplies for the communities’ school children. They decried the federal government’s introduction of new WPA eligibility rules in 1935 that denied relief and jobs to non-citizens, strictures that in San Antonio threw thousands off the relief rolls and incited a round of protests.

Over the next few years, a Popular Front multiracial coalition emerged in San Antonio that included the WAA, National Negro Congress (NNC), and National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), as well as CIO and CTM affiliated unions, such as the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA). These groups linked their campaigns against gender and foreign-born discrimination, racial segregation, and economic deprivation to demand equal rights for all U.S. residents, citizen and non-citizen alike. The labor and unemployed movements, Tenayuca later wrote, “have not only taken up the

⁷¹ Quoted in Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 132.

⁷² Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 155-158; Storch, *Red Chicago*, 129; Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 135; Blackwelder, *Women of the Depression*, 133.

economic demands of the workers, but have entered the struggle for social, cultural and political demands.”⁷³

As a leader in these movements, she formed alliances and friendships with a number of anarchists, socialists, communists, and liberals, while her Popular Frontism steered her toward notoriety as Texas’s most famous Communist. As part of this radical community, she would indeed—as the UC Constitution had promised—fight, struggle, and sacrifice to make real gains for San Antonio’s working-class and non-Anglo communities. She would do so with a critical social analysis whose origins and expressions alike went far beyond any narrowly economic interests.

By the spring of 1937, Tenayuca was spending her Sundays not hanging on the words of radical speakers in Plaza del Zacate, but a few blocks away in the WAA hall on West Travis Street. The national WAA had grown significantly in size, influence, and effectiveness over the previous year. It now had branches in almost every U.S. state, excluding only Nevada and Maine, as well as in Washington D.C. and Puerto Rico. Matching its political muscle and lobbying efforts in state legislatures and the federal government with an organizing structure that could marshal hundreds of thousands, it had launched a wave of sit-ins, hunger marches, and demonstrations across the United States.⁷⁴

At its height, the San Antonio WAA represented over three thousand city residents who, when they could afford it, each paid a few pennies to join the organization. Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and Tejanos made up the vast majority of the membership, but Tenayuca recalls that

⁷³ Tenayuca and Brooks, “The Mexican Question in the Southwest,” 263.

⁷⁴ For histories of Workers Alliance, see Rosenzweig, “Organizing the Unemployed,” 37-60; Folsom, *Impatient Armies of the Poor*, 452-464; Goldberg, “Contesting the Status of Relief Workers during the New Deal,” 337-371; Goldberg, *Citizens and Paupers*, 105-313.

the WAA had “a few black women too” and that there were “black small business owners who gave us money.”⁷⁵ By organizing in neighborhoods and WPA workplaces, she and other radical leaders built the local branch into the “most militant organization in the city,” and mobilized thousands of San Antonians—a multiracial group of men and women, citizens and non-citizens—to demand civil liberties and equal treatment under New Deal legislation.⁷⁶

The WAA’s national leadership and Tenayuca made numerous public commitments to racial equality in the late 1930s, but evidence from San Antonio shows a more complicated picture of multiracial organizing in the unemployed movement. At the third annual convention in June 1937, delegates selected her and several other communist women and people of color, including Francis Duty from Harlem, to serve on the organization’s Executive Committee.⁷⁷ The following year, in “The Mexican Question in the Southwest,” she advocated that any efforts by Mexican Americans to demand “laws making illegal the various forms of Jim-Crowism, segregation in living quarters, schools, parks, hotels, restaurants, etc.,” must be “linked with that of the Negro people.”⁷⁸

Unlike other cities, San Antonio did not have a WPA “Negro Affairs” department, despite requests from Wilson Williams, the Black supervisor of San Antonio’s Civilian

⁷⁵ Tenayuca, interview by Turner, ATC.

⁷⁶ Stuart Jamieson, *Labor Unionism in American Agriculture*, Bulletin No. 836, US Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1945), 34-42.

⁷⁷ Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 132.

⁷⁸ Tenayuca and Brooks, “The Mexican Question in the Southwest,” 264.

Conservation Camp site, to Congressman Maury Maverick and WPA officials.⁷⁹ At least one of San Antonio's fifteen WAA branches was racially segregated, although in Houston the branches were interracial and integrated. The lack of support from WPA officials and WAA organizers made securing employment even more difficult for Black San Antonians. In 1937, the President of the city's "Colored" Local 3 wrote to Eleanor Roosevelt to lodge a complaint of racial discrimination. "They treat us very bad at the W.P.A. offices, minor clerks tell us that there are no jobs for Negroes," she wrote, "There are for white people and Mexicans."⁸⁰ Tenayuca later expressed regret at WAA's unequal labors on behalf of its Black members. "I wish that I had made more of an effort then to get them work, but there were so many people perhaps it was not possible."⁸¹

She did, however, work closely with a small number of Black radicals in the leadership of local Popular Front organizations. With an American flag hung on one wall and a Mexican flag on another, the San Antonio WAA office was a bustle of activity where Mexican, Mexican-American, Anglo, and Black communists, socialists, anarchists, and the politically unaffiliated gathered. The city's network of Popular Front leaders organized across the local unemployed, civil liberties, and labor movements. Tenayuca collaborated with, for instance, communist John Inman, a local Black barber who led a local NAACP chapter; socialist Isidoro Gomez, who served as the WAA's president; and communists James Sager, an Anglo who held elected leadership positions in the CPUSA and UCAPAWA, and Manuela Solis Sager, who had attended

⁷⁹ Maury Maverick to Aubrey Williams, September 8, 1939, Maury Maverick, Jr. Papers, Box 2LL52, Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin (hereafter MMP).

⁸⁰ Quoted in Judith McArthur and Harold Smith, eds., *Texas Through Women's Eyes: The Twentieth Century Experience* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2010), 88.

⁸¹ Tenayuca, interview by Torres, JAGP.

the UOM at the same time as Tenayuca.⁸² “We had anarchists, we had one or two socialists,” Tenayuca remembers, “Party affiliation didn’t matter. Organizing did.”⁸³ Like many Popular Front organizations, WAA incorporated radicals of all stripes into its leadership. “If you made an issue of communism, socialism, or anarchism,” she recalls, “you would be split” at a moment when the movement needed all efforts to secure jobs and relief for San Antonio’s unemployed.⁸⁴

By 1937, the WAA hall on West Travis Street offered members a place where they could gain organizing skills, take literacy classes in Spanish and English, and experience comradeship amid the brutal conditions of the Great Depression. There grassroots leaders could plan delegations and demonstrations, and members could attend Tenayuca’s Workers School, which she had established based on her experiences in the Who-Gives-A-Damn Club and at the UOM in Mexico City. The WAA was a “training ground,” she later claimed.⁸⁵ She and other leaders recruited neighborhood volunteers, most often women, to serve first as block captains, then as elected officials in local branches. Many of these women, connected already through kinship and community relationships, became political through their experiences in mass protests in the streets, delegations to federal and city officials, and the solidarity they witnessed in the WAA.⁸⁶ At times, while grassroots leaders strategized about the next rally, someone would sit at the old

⁸² John Inman also worked closely with the leaders of San Antonio’s National Negro Congress. See Krochmal, *Blue Texas*, 46; Tenayuca, interview by Poyo, ITC; Tenayuca, interview by Zamora, MSS 420, ETP at TWU; Tenayuca, interview by Torres; Manuela Solis Sager, interview by Dedra McDonald, August 11, 1992, transcript, Institute of Texas Cultures Oral History Program, University of Texas at San Antonio.

⁸³ Rips, “Living History,” 9.

⁸⁴ Tenayuca, interview by Zamora, MSS 420, ETP at TWU.

⁸⁵ Rips, “Living History,” 10.

⁸⁶ Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 135.

piano in the hall's corner and accompany a group singing religious songs, *La Marseillaise* or the *Internationale* in Spanish, the lyrics to which Tenayuca had learned as a child in the Plaza.⁸⁷

In the WAA office and in West Side homes, Tenayuca, Bob Williams (the nineteen-year-old WAA Texas State President), and other radical volunteers listened to their neighbors' stories of unemployment, hunger, and discrimination. Some days, she sat at the office typewriter to transcribe these names and stories into letters to WPA officials in Washington D.C. In these official complaints, she demanded that the federal administration intervene in the actions of the Texas state and local Relief Commissions, which often refused to register eligible Mexican-American U.S. citizens for WPA jobs on infrastructure and other projects, forcing them instead to find agricultural work picking celery and radishes in the summer months and shelling pecans in the winter. She accused San Antonio officials of misusing their authority in denying WPA jobs and relief to the city's non-Anglo residents, which "resulted in forced labor" and "starvation wages."⁸⁸ On behalf of WAA members, she wrote to the federal Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and successfully initiated several federal INS hearings in San Antonio on the local border patrols' violent actions and unlawful deportations. She was actively using New Deal structures to pursue racial and transnational justice.

Other days, she went door-to-door in the West Side neighborhood to recruit leaders for WAA. With over ten thousand residents crammed into four square miles, and more arriving from Texas's agricultural fields every day, the West Side provided plenty of opportunities for her to

⁸⁷ Tenayuca, interview by Zamora, MSS 420, ETP at TWU.

⁸⁸ González, *Redeeming La Raza*, 152. Letter from Emma Tenayuca to Harry L. Hopkins, WPA Administrator, November 15, 1937, Box 5, Folder 42, MSS 420, ETP at TWU. Letter from Emma Tenayuca to Aubrey Williams, Deputy WPA Administrator, January 13, 1938, Box 5, Folder 42, MSS 420, TWU; Vargas, "Tejana Radical," 562.

come into direct contact with the devastating effects of joblessness for San Antonio's families. She never forgot the signs of starvation and illness that overcrowding and lack of running water created in her home city, which had one of the highest rates of tuberculosis and infant mortality in the United States. In an interview decades later, she vividly recalled helping a young man with tuberculosis rescue his sister from the red light district and witnessing him coughing on the way back to his family's shack. "I saw a huge part of his lungs."⁸⁹ Tenayuca, too, contracted tuberculosis in the early 1940s. San Antonio's poorest residents desperately needed jobs, but they also needed the city to invest in public housing, education, infrastructure, and public health in their neighborhoods. It required a transnational mass movement to mobilize and demand these resources.

"What had been a struggle for jobs," claimed Tenayuca, "had become a mass movement against deportation, for justice against discrimination."⁹⁰ She and the other radical WAA leaders led hundreds of unemployed and WPA workers to federal immigration offices, City Hall, and local WPA authorities, and thousands to public demonstrations in the city's streets and public parks, where they protested deportations, police and border control brutality, cuts in relief and jobs, and civil liberties violations.⁹¹ Leaders from the WAA, CPUSA, and UCAPAWA worked closely with CIO and Mexican unions in the Texas Agricultural Workers Organization, which called for "a minimum wage for farm workers, a union wage scale on all government work relief

⁸⁹ Tenayuca, interview by Torres, JAGP.

⁹⁰ Tenayuca, "A Link to the Past," MSS 420, ETP at TWU.

⁹¹ See, for example, "Federal Building Stormed by Workers' Group: Three Charge Beatings by Border Patrol," *San Antonio Light*, February 23, 1937; "Probe Opened in Alleged Beatings," *San Antonio Light*, February 24, 1937; "Jobless Parade Under Red Signs," *San Antonio Express*, March 9, 1937; "Sit Down on San Antonio Relief," *New York Times*, April 27, 1937.

projects, the admission of Tejanos into the AFL, [and] broader cooperation with labor unions in Mexico.”⁹² Tenayuca and Nathan Kleban, her former high school classmate and fellow communist, both attended a Texas conference with the CTM and UCAPAWA in 1937, and participated in planning campaigns to organize agricultural and oil industry workers.⁹³ San Antonio’s politicians and business owners took notice of the expanding Popular Front coalition, and the activities generated from the WAA’s office.

On the morning of June 29, 1937, Tenayuca, Williams, and approximately two hundred laid-off WPA workers and WAA members filled the corridors outside the WPA District 10 Director’s office in downtown San Antonio. Unable to disperse the large crowd, the director called for reinforcements to back up his security guards. Tenayuca refused to leave until the director addressed the groups’ concerns. When the Anglo police arrived, they physically removed and arrested Tenayuca, Williams, and four other leaders.⁹⁴

That afternoon, with the WAA’s top leaders in Bexar County Jail, Police Chief Owen Kilday directed officers to destroy all the property in its hall on Travis Street, where many Mexicans and Mexican Americans went for education, help, and resources, and which for Tenayuca symbolized her Popular Front politics. Armed with axes, sixteen officers “clubbed everyone within sight but were careful not to hit anyone on the head” in their “systemic

⁹² Green and Botson, “Left Activism and Texas Labor,” 118; Jamieson, *Labor Unionism*, 275-276.

⁹³ “C.I.O. Union to Seek Full Organization of Valley Produce Workers,” *Brownsville Valley Sunday Star*, October 31, 1937.

⁹⁴ “200 Former Employes [sic] Engage in Sitdown,” *San Antonio Light*, June 29, 1937; “Downtown Melee Brings Six Arrests,” *San Antonio Express*, June 30, 1937; González, *Redeeming La Raza*, 153.

destruction of everything in the place.”⁹⁵ They ripped the American and Mexican flags from the wall, hammered the piano to pieces, smashed dozens of dishes and 250 chairs, and (in a not so subtle attack on the right to free speech) stomped the typewriter and duplicating machine into twisted wreckage. Chief Kilday later claimed that his officers had confiscated communist literature. Photographs published in local newspapers the following day revealed a pile of rubble in a room resembling a tornado’s aftermath.⁹⁶

The arrests of San Antonio’s WAA leaders and destruction of its hall drew local, national, and international attention, and a storm of protest from liberal and leftist supporters.⁹⁷ Addressed to Mayor C.K. Quin and Police Chief Kilday, telegrams decrying the police actions poured into the city, while across the state newspapers published photographs of pretty and petite Tenayuca behind bars and the remnants of the organization’s property in its trashed office.⁹⁸ When informed of the destruction, she described the police officers’ actions as a “plain and open violation of civil liberties and of all lawful procedure.”⁹⁹ She would not have been surprised, however, as her dreams for the Workers School and other activities at Travis Street had been under threat for months. Federal immigration officials viewed the classes as threatening, and had

⁹⁵ “Use of Axes by Police Rapped,” *San Antonio Light*, June 30, 1937.

⁹⁶ “Headquarters of Workers Alliance Razed by Police,” *Houston Chronicle*, June 30, 1937; “Labor Office Wrecked by Police,” *San Antonio Light*, June 30, 1937; “Police Wreck Workers Alliance Office Headquarters,” *San Antonio Evening News*, June 30, 1937; John C. Granbery, “Civil Liberties in Texas,” *The Christian Century*, October 27, 1937, 1326-1327; Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 133.

⁹⁷ Gonzalez, *Redeeming La Raza*, 153.

⁹⁸ Robert Warren, “Texas Cops Jail Alliance Members, Wreck Offices,” *Daily Worker*, July 2, 1937; “Girl Named as Inciter of Riot,” *San Antonio Light*, July 13, 1937.

⁹⁹ “Riots Follow Sit-in Strike at WPA; Police do the Rest,” *San Antonio Express News*, June 30, 1937.

raided the office numerous times. On one occasion, they arrested seven of her students, and later deported five of them to Mexico.¹⁰⁰

Local, national, and international supporters responded to the June 29 events. San Antonio's Citizen's Committee for Social Justice, a left-liberal Popular Front group, published an open letter in support of Tenayuca's rights as an American citizen, noting the irony of "all this brutality and vandalism at the hands of the very forces brought into existence for the protection of civil rights, private property, and persons of citizens."¹⁰¹ The leader of the city's branch of the Women's International League for Peace and Justice signed the letter. The WAA's national president, David Lasser, expressed his anger in a telegram to the mayor: "Vigorously protest brutal interference with legitimate activity of our members in your city."¹⁰² Some radical-led labor unions joined the fray, too. The National Maritime Union (NMU) donated to Tenayuca's defense fund, and UCAPAWA, at its inaugural convention in July, passed a resolution condemning the city officials' actions, especially the "tearing and desecration of our national emblem, Stars and Stripes, and likewise the national emblem of Mexico."¹⁰³ The Mexican government dispatched a consul general to investigate the arrests and attacks on Mexican nationals during the June events. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) launched an

¹⁰⁰ Blackwelder, "Emma Tenayuca," 206.

¹⁰¹ "Gangster Police Methods Come to Texas," public statement by the Citizens' Committee for Social Justice, June 1937, Workers Alliance File, Box 2E189, Folder 5, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, Barker Texas History Center, University of Texas at Austin.

¹⁰² "Alliance Girl Denies WPA Rioting Charges," *San Antonio Light*, July 14, 1937.

¹⁰³ Proceedings of the First National Convention of UCAPAWA, July 1937, pamphlet, Labor Movement in Texas Collection, Barker History Center, University of Texas at Austin.

inquiry, and assigned Everitt Looney, a high profile lawyer and former Texas assistant attorney general, to defend her at the upcoming July trial.¹⁰⁴

On July 13, 1937, the two-day trial had opened with Chief Kilday's testimony. Tenayuca had the last word. After less than two hours of deliberation, the six jurists unanimously acquitted her of all charges. Some newspapers even praised her oratory skills and depicted her as a religious figure, a "Joan of Arc of the West Side."¹⁰⁵ Papers and the local political establishment had identified her as a "Red" for years, but the jury's decision and her public support illustrates the strength of the Popular Front's left-liberal coalition in the face of anticommunism and threats to civil liberties and due process.

In the months after her acquittal, liberal support continued to build for Tenayuca and the WAA, while offering harsh critiques of the city's political establishment. The U.S. Senate's La Follette Civil Liberties Committee investigated her arrest. The Texas ACLU called for the impeachment of the Mayor and the Police Chief, and provided the resources for her and the WAA to file a civil suit against the police department demanding \$37,000 in damages. Prominent religious leaders published statements lambasting the city officials' actions.¹⁰⁶

On the afternoon of her exoneration, Tenayuca had told the press that she would "continue her fight to obtain reinstatement of workers."¹⁰⁷ At the same time, over four hundred

¹⁰⁴ A.L. Wirin, ACLU Report, news clipping, MSS 420, ETP at TWU.

¹⁰⁵ "Emma and Her Disciples," *San Antonio Light*, July 14, 1937.

¹⁰⁶ "Senate Probe of Alliance Arrests Due," *San Antonio Light*, July 18, 1937; "Workers Alliance Files \$37,000 Suit," *Houston Chronicle*, January 8, 1938; Granbery, "Civil Liberties in Texas," 1326; Karl Pruess, "Personality, Politics, and the Price of Justice: Ephraim Frisch, San Antonio's 'Radical' Rabbi," *American Jewish History* 85, no. 3 (September 1997), 276.

¹⁰⁷ "Freed Workers Chief Keeps Up Fight," *San Antonio Light*, July 15, 1937.

unemployed and WAA members gathered outside the WPA labor office. The officials agreed to interview fewer than forty of the unemployed protesters and called on the police to disperse the remaining four hundred.¹⁰⁸ The struggle continued.

Tenayuca's Grassroots Anti-Racist, Feminist Organizing and Writings

A few months after the sit-down demonstration and Tenayuca's subsequent trial, the WPA dropped a further one thousand relief recipients from the rolls in San Antonio. Mayor Quin announced that the city had terminated all funding for relief activities and fired the local Welfare Committee's caseworkers responsible for distributing food and supplies. One of the only choices for economic survival left to the unemployed was shelling pecans for less than 50 cents a day. After months of collective actions directed at City Hall and WPA officials, the WAA leadership, in collaboration with UCAPAWA Local 172, turned its attention to the pecan industry and began to organize, building on the neighborhood and community ties the WAA had created over the past few years.

By January 1938, a winter of want had taken a toll on tens of thousands of West Side San Antonians, including three thousand WAA members shelling pecans for starvation wages. Whole families labored together to earn a pittance for full-time work during the high season, shelling and sorting pecans in dilapidated shacks without running water. National labor officials decried the pecan shellers' pay and working conditions. "Do you in San Antonio call that wages?" exclaimed Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins on a visit to the city.¹⁰⁹ Yet she should not have

¹⁰⁸ "Jobless Storm SA WPA Office Crying for Work," *The Austin Statesman*, July 15, 1937, 1. On August 2, a jury found Robert Williams guilty and ordered him to pay a \$25 fine.

¹⁰⁹ Pecan Workers Relief Committee and Pecan Workers Local no. 172, *America's Lowest Paid Workers: San Antonio's Pecan Shellers Present Their Case*, pamphlet, George and Latane

been surprised given that agricultural workers, as the pecan-shellers were defined, were not covered by the New Deal's wage codes.

On February 1, between six and eight thousand pecan-shellers, enraged after the industry announced a 20 percent wage cut the day before, launched what became one of Texas's most significant strikes.¹¹⁰ The city's political establishment responded as it had to the WAA's protests: with violence, civil rights violations, and anticommunist accusations.¹¹¹ The police arrested over one thousand strikers and supporters, including Tenayuca, for so-called illegal picketing, threatened to deport protestors—citizens or not—and used tear gas and water hoses to quell skirmishes at the overcrowded county prison.

For many strikers, this was not their first protest and they were not easily deterred by the political machine's attempts to repress the labor uprising.¹¹² "The pecan shellers strike grew out of the Workers Alliance," Tenayuca recalled, "it became a mass movement, and West Side San Antonio has never been the same."¹¹³ Pecan shelling was traditionally women's work, and

Lambert Papers, Collection 127, Labor History Archives, University of Texas at Arlington (hereafter GLLP).

¹¹⁰ For accounts of the pecan shellers' strike, see Selden C. Menefee and Orin C. Cassmore, *The Pecan Shellers of San Antonio: The Problem of Underpaid and Unemployed Mexican Labor* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1940); Richard Croxdale, "The 1938 San Antonio Pecan Shellers' Strike," in Richard Croxdale and Melissa Hield, *Women in the Texas Workforce: Yesterday and Today* (Austin: People's History in Texas, Inc., 1979); González, *Redeeming La Raza*, 154-157; Krochmal, *Blue Texas*, 21-29; Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 134-143.

¹¹¹ See, for example, "Mayor Tells Shellers to Kick Out Reds," *San Antonio Express*, February 5, 1938; "Red Plot to Control West Side Charged at Strike Probe," *San Antonio Express*, February 15, 1938.

¹¹² Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 141.

¹¹³ Emma Tenayuca to Vicki Leighty, September 25, 1984, Box 4, MSS 420, ETP at TWU.

although the Depression had forced some men into the packing sheds too, women “occupied center stage during the strike.”¹¹⁴ WAA block captains, many of them women, mobilized their neighbors to join the pecan-shellers’ picket lines and mass demonstrations, where they heard Tenayuca speak before thousands. Although the 37-day job action ended with a pyrrhic victory for UCAPAWA and the pecan shellers (they won a small wage increase, but within a few years the industry automated and drastically reduced its workforce), the dramatic events of the West Side uprising captured national headlines and occupy an important space in San Antonio’s history.

The strikes’ dramatic events, however, have come to overshadow the years-long campaigns for civil liberties and economic justice that the radical-led WAA and its Popular Front coalitions had already pursued.¹¹⁵ Months ahead of the strike’s first day, WAA and UCAPAWA leaders had held joint strategy sessions on mobilizing the city’s unemployed and under-employed, especially in the pecan industry. Before any pecan-shellers had put down their hammers, Tenayuca had envisioned the strike as a community-wide protest tied to the WAA’s calls on all San Antonio’s employers to hire and pay fair wages to non-Anglos, and its demands that city officials invest resources in improving living conditions on the West Side.

Tenayuca and other radical—socialist, anarchist, and communist—men and women of the WAA were the driving force of the pecan shellers’ strike. Most of the pecan shellers union’s Executive Board members were radical WAA leaders, claimed George Lambert, a Socialist Party activist whom UCAPAWA had assigned to the strike just after it began. The communists were

¹¹⁴ Camacho, *Migrant Imaginaries*, 52.

¹¹⁵ For example, one historian refers to the Alliance’s years-long mobilizations as “quiet organizing among a handful of *mexicano* workers.” See Krochmal, *Blue Texas*, 21.

the “only people I could depend on for any support whatever,” he wrote to Socialist leader Norman Thomas.¹¹⁶ About a quarter were WAA members, many of whom had taken part in delegations and demonstrations at City Hall and the WPA offices the previous year. In the first days of the walkout, the strikers elected Tenayuca as the action’s official leader. Other women, including Minnie Rendon, Manuela Solis Sager, and Juana Sanchez, also played significant roles in the strike, as they had in unemployed protests. They walked picket lines, collected relief supplies, and participated in strategy discussions and decision-making.¹¹⁷ “From her office at the local Workers Alliance,” reported *Time*, Tenayuca “continued to pull strings with the assistance of her ‘gang,’ some 300 devoted followers whom she deploys with a masterly hand in picket lines or mass meetings.”¹¹⁸ The magazine’s portrayal of her as a radical puppet-master echoed depictions of communists in popular culture and erased the strike’s rank-and-file WAA leadership.

Despite her popularity and organizing successes on the West Side, or perhaps because of them, Tenayuca faced multiple challenges to enacting her political vision and organizing model, challenges that marginalized her both at the time and in retrospect. Shortly after the strike began, Donald Henderson, UCAPAWA’s national director, Communist Party member, and a former college professor, publicly removed her from the position of strike leader to which rank-and-file strikers had elected her. Despite his own radical politics, Henderson claimed that Tenayuca’s communism made her a problem for the strikers. Yet, he replaced her with two other radicals,

¹¹⁶ George Lambert to Norman Thomas, February 6, 1940, GLLP.

¹¹⁷ Teresa Acosta and Ruthe Winegarten, eds., *Las Tejanas: Three Hundred Years of History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 143; Croxdale, “The 1938 Pecan Shellers’ Strike,” 31.

¹¹⁸ “La Passionaria,” *Time*, February 28, 1938.

George Lambert and Luisa Moreno—both of whom, unlike Tenayuca, had attended college—and assigned several non-Spanish speaking Anglo male union organizers from out-of-state to negotiate with the industry bosses.

Moreno, a radical labor organizer from an elite Guatemalan family, and Lambert worked together to oversee the strike and contract negotiations.¹¹⁹ As Lambert, a non-Spanish speaking socialist, later described, “Henderson still had no Anglo-American available to negotiate, so I helped the pecan workers get their contract” a few months after the end of the strike.¹²⁰ It was Moreno, not Tenayuca, claims one historian, who “as the union’s official representative, organized the strikers into a united, disciplined force that the employers could not longer ignore.”¹²¹ Historians also claim that Henderson’s decision was based in a calculation that as a communist she was a liability for the strikers’ campaign and her leadership would lessen or eliminate its liberal support.¹²² Yet these accounts ignore the widespread radicalism within the grassroots leadership of both the WAA and the strike, and the clear differences over strategy between Tenayuca and national labor leaders. Similar to *Time* magazine’s reporting, they also effectively erase the unemployed movements’ grassroots organizers from the history of the pecan strike.

¹¹⁹ For information on Luisa Moreno, see Ruiz, “Una Mujer Sin Fronteras,” 1-20. Moreno shared an apartment with Tenayuca’s friend Peggy Vance, but Ruiz claims that Moreno and Tenayuca had a “tenuous and tense working relationship.”

¹²⁰ George Lambert to Norman Thomas, February 6, 1940, GLLP. For more on George Lambert, see Krochmal, *Blue Texas*, 14-21.

¹²¹ Vicki Ruiz, *From Out of the Shadows: A History of Mexican Women in the United States, 1900-1995* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 79.

¹²² González, *Redeeming La Raza*, 157; Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 124.

Henderson's removal of Tenayuca from her elected position resulted more likely from a clash between the two over organizing strategies and models, particularly his insistence on installing Anglos as the union's negotiators and elite or middle-class organizers as the strike's public leadership. National shifts in the WAA and the CIO away from grassroots direct action toward national-level lobbying also created on-the-ground tensions during labor strikes and campaigns. One historian claims, for example, that Henderson made the decision not just because she was a 'Red' but also because the CIO was transferring its resources from strikes to negotiations and collective bargaining, a change that created fewer chances for women to lead and specifically undermined her leadership.¹²³ Simultaneously, CIO leaders argued that local WAA branches should disband and instead be chartered as CIO locals, creating an additional threat to her leadership in San Antonio.

At the time, Tenayuca understood the dangers in Henderson's strategy of relying on union leaders who were temporarily staying in San Antonio instead of the city's working-class grassroots radicals and local activists. Her Popular Frontism centered on both the potential for the rank-and-file and organizers from the community (especially women) to lead the labor and unemployed movements, and the necessity of collective action for any civil liberties or workers' rights victories. Years later, she was still complaining that UCAPAWA had brought in Anglo "outsiders who did not speak Spanish" to run the strike and negotiate on behalf of the workers.¹²⁴ After volunteering on many campaigns to organize San Antonio garment workers during the 1930s, she criticized David Dubinsky, the national director of ILGWU, because his "idea was

¹²³ Vargas states that the CPUSA's "subservience to party directives and discipline prevailed" and that "communism became the pretext for San Antonio city officials and police to unleash a torrent of violence against the strike and its leaders." Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 140

¹²⁴ Ruthe Weingarten, "Notes on Meeting," March 1984, RWP.

just to grab these people and throw them into the union” without building a strong local rank-and-file leadership.¹²⁵ Such top-down, short-term thinking, driven by racist, sexist, and classist assumptions, constituted a consistent obstacle to her Popular Front vision of grassroots power.

Tenayuca would soon find anticommunism and white supremacy beyond the labor movement to be an even bigger obstacle. The beginning of the Little Red Scare, led in part by Texas Congressman Martin Dies, changed national and local politics for New Deal politicians and activists, such as Maury Maverick. After winning election twice to the U.S. Congress from Bexar County, Maverick ran for a third term in 1938. He lost to the brother of San Antonio’s Police Chief, in a campaign that the conservative Democratic political machine painted as “Communism vs. Americanism.”¹²⁶ After this loss, he decided to run for mayor of his hometown instead. With support from San Antonio’s leaders and members of local Popular Front coalitions, including Tenayuca and the WAA, he narrowly won and began serving as the city’s mayor in 1939.

Meanwhile, in the 1938 statewide elections, the successful candidate for Texas governor, Lee “Pappy” O’Daniel, won with support from the Chamber of Commerce and the American Federation of Labor. The O’Daniel administration led the state’s attack on pro-labor New Deal legislation, and rolled back any progressive gains using new regressive tax structures, limits on

¹²⁵ Rips, “Living History,” 10; González, *Redeeming La Raza*, 157. In 1960, Dubinsky failed to support San Antonio’s Mexican and Mexican-American women in the Tex-Son strike, when he ended strike benefits after eighteen months of picketing. The strike continued for another two years until the company shut the factory. For more on the Tex-Son strike, see Krochmal, *Blue Texas*, 180-186.

¹²⁶ The local AFL opposed Workers Alliance and the CIO. See, for example, “Pledge Peaceful Policy,” *San Antonio Light*, July 15, 1937; Krochmal, *Blue Texas*, 37.

state services, oppression of immigrants and non-Anglos, and the passage of anti-labor laws.¹²⁷

Multiracial, progressive organizing was about to become even more difficult.

The Texas Communist Party also ran a multiracial group of candidates in 1938: Tenayuca for Congress; her Anglo husband, Homer Brooks, for Governor; African American Cecil Robinet for Lieutenant Governor; and Nathan Kleban, who was Jewish, for Attorney General. Although the Texas Communist Party's formal numbers never topped more than one thousand and their candidates never won any political campaigns, its leaders' influence outweighed its short stack of membership cards.¹²⁸ What the Party stood for—civil liberties, free speech, and interracial organizing—was more threatening than its small cadre of activists. The candidates' shared platform contained both economic and political planks, including calls for the nationalization of banks and railways, the establishment of a minimum wage and an eight hour day, the end of the poll tax and white primary, and the “full enjoyment of political and civil rights” for non-Anglos.¹²⁹

Tenayuca and Brooks expanded on these ideas in their co-written essay, “The Mexican Question in the Southwest.” Calling for the building of a “people’s movement” that united the working-class in Mexican-American, Black, and Anglo communities across the Southwest, she and Brooks addressed four main sites of struggle for economic, social, civil, and citizenship rights. The people’s movement, they wrote, should protest racial and ethnic discrimination in

¹²⁷ Green and Botson, “Looking for Lefty,” 122.

¹²⁸ Vargas claims that there were approximately 500 Texas CPUSA members in the late 1930s and that in San Antonio most of the city’s 40 active Party members were Jewish immigrants. Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 133, 145.

¹²⁹ Texas Communist Party, *Free Texas from Monopoly Control! Bring the New Deal to Texas*, pamphlet (Houston: Texas Communist Party, 1938), 3-4; Carleton, *Red Scare!*, 29.

wages, unions, and government programs, and support the New Deal's economic measures. Their plank on equal education insisted on bilingual Spanish and English instruction in majority Mexican-American communities. In solidarity with Black Americans, they demanded new legislation outlawing Jim Crow segregation in schools, restaurants, hotels, and all public services. Lastly, they advocated for the removal of obstructions to voting (i.e. proof of citizenship, residency requirements, and the poll tax) and for the overhaul of the cumbersome federal path to citizenship for all immigrants.¹³⁰

In recounting a number of recent successful mobilizations for these demands, Tenayuca and Brooks looked to San Antonio and the Workers Alliance. When WAA members and the city's unemployed protested cuts in relief and violations of their labor rights, local U.S. Border patrol beat several protesters and deported others. In response, she and the WAA rallied left-liberal Anglo supporters and informed the Mexican government, which resulted in a federal investigation and more oversight over the local patrolmen. The San Antonio WAA also secured government resources for hundreds of Mexican Americans to take Spanish literacy classes held in its offices. Local radical-led unions passed resolutions supporting bilingual education.¹³¹ Any future victories for Mexican-American rights, they claimed, would depend on close relationships with pro-labor, pro-civil rights Anglo progressives in the Southwest, such as Maury Maverick, and with the movement for Black civil rights in the South and Southwest.

¹³⁰ Benjamin Balthaser describes the essay as a "meta-commentary on the U.S. Popular Front, which simultaneously articulates a demand on the U.S. state and nation at the same time it theorizes an international sense of identity and politics." Balthaser, *Anti-Imperialism Modernism*, 197.

¹³¹ Tenayuca and Brooks, "The Mexican Question in the Southwest," 262-263.

Explicitly demanding the extension of citizenship rights and New Deal benefits to working-class non-Anglos, Tenayuca and Brooks identified key similarities and differences between the oppression of Black Americans in the South and that of the Spanish-speaking populations in the Southwest's borderlands—both those whose families had lived in the area before the U.S. annexed it in 1848, and those whose families had immigrated from Mexico. “A blow against the oppression of one will be a blow for the freedom of both,” they promised.¹³² They had clearly read Marx on trade unions and Lenin on self-determination and the “National Question,” but Tenayuca’s Marxism also emerged from her own experiences as a working-class colonial subject and citizen who engaged in collective public actions and electoral politics, not from direct experiences of wage labor’s deprivations.¹³³

Police brutality and anti-radicalism marked her early experiences in labor and unemployed activism, as did solidarity with the transnational and multiracial community of radicals she acted alongside in the city’s movements for civil liberties and labor rights. Her direct experience of state violence and racial discrimination, as well as her analysis of capitalism, all stemmed from this political education and collective action.

Her Popular Frontist vision of a multiracial and multiethnic working-class included both the “internal colony,” as Marxists defined the Black population in Southern states, and the “national minority,” as she and Brooks called Spanish-speaking groups in the Southwest states.

¹³² Tenayuca and Brooks, “The Mexican Question in the Southwest,” 267.

¹³³ For discussions of this essay, see Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 144-145; Balthaser, *Anti-Imperialist Modernism*, 193; González, *Redeeming La Raza*, 157-160. Balthaser claims that Tenayuca’s claims to be both a colonial subject and a citizen are not contradictory because her politics were situated in both an American national identity and in a transnational, working-class movement. He argues that her essay fuses socialist internationalism and transnational borderlands politics.

She denounced the government's oppressive treatment of both as evidence of the U.S. as an imperial power, calling for full democratic rights for Black and Mexican-American citizens, but she also noted that Mexican Americans had historically had political rights not granted to Black Americans. In the 1970s, she was still thinking about these questions of colonialism, imperialism, and liberation. Despite more than a century of local and federal attempts to treat working-class Mexican Americans as colonial subjects and repress their political participation, she stood by her analysis that they constituted a national minority—not an internal colony—because they had enjoyed consistent access to political representation, even if imperfectly. As she wrote to a friend in 1975, “Mexicans have always been active in the political life of the communities in the Southwest.”¹³⁴

More important than the debates over Marxist terms, she had articulated a Popular Front politics that encompassed culture, politics, and economics, and that threatened San Antonio's political and economic structures. She insisted on building multiracial and multiethnic unions and cross-class community organizations, with rank-and-file and community leaders. These ideas and commitments continued to shape her life and politics, even as anticommunism and white supremacy reduced left-liberal public support for Popular Front activism and forced her from a public stage.

Conclusion

On August 25 1939, twenty-two-year-old Tenayuca and 150 members of the CPUSA—Black Americans, Mexican Americans, and Anglos—gathered for their annual Texas state convention in San Antonio's Municipal Auditorium. To protect the assembled communists,

¹³⁴ Tenayuca to Miss Lupe Anguiano, September 6, 1975, ETP at TWC.

Mayor Maverick had dispatched dozens of police officers, along with a fire engine, to surround the site and put their bodies between the communists inside the auditorium and a large crowd that had gathered outside to protest the meeting.¹³⁵

When the communists opened the proceedings with their traditional singing of the “Star-Spangled Banner,” the five to eight thousand mostly Anglo protestors, including known Ku Klux Klan leaders, American Legion members, and conservative politicians, drowned them out with a competing rendition so loud that those trapped inside could hear it through the closed windows. Armed with a truckload of bricks, the throng then chanted, “Drag out the Reds,” and sang “The Eyes of Texas are upon you / You cannot get away.”¹³⁶ The *New York Times* reported that the police aimed water hoses at the threatening crowd, and “as powerful streams of water hit the melee outside, rocks began hurtling through the glass windows in the meeting room.”¹³⁷ Tenayuca and her comrades escaped unharmed during the riot, but twenty-five people, including both police and demonstrators, were injured. The protestors, some armed with knives, stormed the government building and caused thousands of dollars in damages, slashing seats and curtains.¹³⁸

¹³⁵ For contemporary accounts of the riot, see “Mob Makes Auditorium a Shambles,” *San Antonio Light*, August 26, 1939; “Texas Reds Ask U.S. Aid After Rally Dispersal,” *New York Herald Tribune*, August 27, 1939.

¹³⁶ “Windows Rocked by 5,000 Angered by Red Session,” *San Antonio Express*, August 26, 1939.

¹³⁷ “Communists Flee from 5,000 Texans,” *New York Times*, August 26, 1939.

¹³⁸ For accounts of the riot, see Carleton, *Red Scare!*, 33; González, *Redeeming La Raza*, 161; Krochmal, *Blue Texas*, 52; Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 146; Allan Turner, “A Night that Changed Lives, San Antonio,” *Houston Chronicle*, December 14, 1986, 46.

Later that evening, some of the rioters donned white hoods, and burned an effigy of Maverick pinned with a sign that read “Hanged that Americanism might live.” One protestor threatened to lynch the mayor and his family who were in hiding. The significance of this threat would not have been lost on the former Congressman, who during his two terms had been the only Southern politician to vote for proposed federal anti-lynching legislation.¹³⁹

For Tenayuca, Red epithets, violence, and death threats were nothing new. “I was very lucky never to be lynched,” she later declared.¹⁴⁰ These threats stretched from the American Legion’s attack on her Who-Gives-A-Damn Club in 1934 to the police chief’s order that officers raze the Workers Alliance hall in 1937. The KKK members rioting outside the municipal building were just the latest incidence of a perpetual threat. The city’s political and business elite continually used violence, anticommunism, and civil rights violations in attempts to break up the Popular Front’s left-liberal coalition, silence free speech, and quash democratic dissent. “The ruling class cannot rule,” Tenayuca told an interviewer in 1987, “without the people who pull jobs as police.”¹⁴¹

As Southern Democrats and Republicans used anticommunism to drive a wedge between New Deal liberals and radical activists, they especially attacked WAA branches in cities that had formed interracial branches. By the time Texas communists gathered in San Antonio in August 1939, the backlash against New Deal legislation had led to new attacks on Americans’ citizenship rights, especially the rights of those who were foreign-born, non-white, or on public relief. U.S. citizens who publicly held radical politics were particular targets. As one of the

¹³⁹ Doyle, “Maury Maverick,” 202.

¹⁴⁰ Tenayuca, “Speech to Newspaper Guild Conference,” ATC.

¹⁴¹ Tenayuca, interview by Poyo, ITC.

Municipal Auditorium rioters told a journalist at the time, Tenayuca and her fellow communists “wrote themselves out of the Constitution, and they aren’t entitled to free speech or anything else.”¹⁴²

Perhaps Tenayuca would have retorted that the Founders had originally written her out of the Constitution, and that as Americans she and other radical organizers were merely trying to write themselves back in as a way to secure all the rights that it endowed. “The traditions our country has here are tremendous,” she told an interviewer in 1983. “You consider the Declaration of Independence—true you men did not include us women in the Bill of Rights, you did not include the Indians, you did not include the blacks, but somewhere we’re attempting to solve these problems.”¹⁴³ In the next chapter of her life, Tenayuca faced significant challenges to her own attempts to solve these problems and enact her Popular Front politics.

¹⁴² Quoted in Krochmal, *Blue Texas*, 52.

¹⁴³ Tenayuca, interview by Turner, ATC.

CHAPTER THREE

“We were the pre-feminists”: Ah Quon McElrath and the Labor Movement in Honolulu

“Nobody gives the members of the Communist Party any real credit for the magnificent job of organizing they did.”

Ah Quon McElrath, 1977¹

“We must recognize and pass on the story of the magnificent role the forebearers of immigrants have played in the development of this country and their battles for freedom and justice.”

Ah Quon McElrath, 1994²

As a child in Hawai’i in the 1920s, Ah Quon (Leong) McElrath often had the words “Honolulu Plantation” imprinted on her skin. Her mother used to stitch old jute bags stamped with the phrase into new underclothes for her and her siblings. “One side of your buttock would read ‘Honolulu’ and the other would read ‘Plantation,’” McElrath recalled decades later. “You could never wash off that ink.”³ The repurposed material may have given her a temporary tattoo, but, as one of Hawai’i’s leading newspapers editorialized after her death in 2008, she more than returned the favor, leaving a “bright, indelible mark in Hawaii’s history.”⁴

Over the course of her lifetime, Hawai’i transformed from an oligarchic American colony to one of the most politically progressive states in the nation. In 1915, when she was born in Honolulu to Chinese immigrant parents, white supremacy and the “most airtight economic

¹ McElrath, interview by Roffman, 150.

² McElrath, “From Old to New Plantations.” 12.

³ McElrath, “We gave workers a sense of dignity,” interview by Yung, 261.

⁴ Editorial, “Isles owe debt of Aloha to Ah Quon McElrath,” *Honolulu Advertiser*, December 16, 2008.

oligarchy in the world” defined its economy and its immigration policies.⁵ Beginning in the 1930s, she and a network of Popular Front labor and political activists, many of them women of color, helped build a powerful, radical-led, multiracial social justice movement—with the International Longshoremen’s and Warehousemen’s Union (ILWU) at its center—that drove the islands’ economic and political transformation.⁶

This generation of Popular Fronters demanded equal pay for equal work, better housing for their communities, and bans on racial and gender discrimination. They were communists, socialists, and progressives; daughters of Asian immigrants; indigenous Hawaiians and transplants from the mainland; and college educated professionals and high school dropouts. Some toiled in the sugar, pineapple, or shipping industries, while others earned a living as professional teachers, lawyers, or social workers. Collectively, these radical and progressive women shaped labor unions, democratic politics, and social welfare legislation in twentieth century Hawai’i.

Members of the ILWU and the Communist Party (CPUSA) played significant roles in Hawai’i’s twentieth century labor and social justice movements. “We were the pre-feminists,” declared McElrath in 2006.⁷ Women of color (whose parents had come from Japan and China, or

⁵ Carey McWilliams, *Brothers Under the Skin* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1964), 187. For accounts of immigration and labor structures in Hawai’i, see Edna Bonacich, “Asian Labor in the Development of California and Hawaii,” in *Labor Immigration Under Capitalism: Asian Workers in the United States Before World War II*, edited by Lucie Cheng and Edna Bonacich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 130-185; Carol C. Fan, “Asian Women in Hawai’i: Migration, Family, Work, and Identity,” *NWSA Journal* 8, no.1 (Spring, 1996): 70-84; Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1989).

⁶ The ILWU changed its name to the International Longshore and Warehouse Union in 1997.

⁷ McElrath, interview by author.

were indigenous Hawaiian) and a few white women “were the ones who stuck with the union throughout the early, bitter days of organizing,” she recalled, adding that it was the women in the ILWU auxiliaries who had the “courage to get up and speak.”⁸

This chapter explores how McElrath became a Popular Front communist and radical social worker, and traces her contributions to Hawai’i’s labor and civil liberties movements in the 1930s and 1940s. The chapter’s first half documents her early experiences as a second-generation Chinese-American girl growing up in a multiracial Honolulu neighborhood in an American colony. As a young woman, she absorbed lessons at home, in school, and on cannery production lines that shaped her understandings of citizenship, community, and national identity. She forged her political vision in Popular Front communist organizations and union organizing drives in Hawai’i’s canneries, department stores, government departments, and sugar plantations, alongside other radical women, such as her friend, socialist labor organizer Rachel Saiki. She began her social work career reading the radical rank-and-file social work movement magazine, *Social Work Today*, and volunteering in campaigns to secure union contracts that included equal pay for equal work, healthcare, and housing.⁹ Despite the CPUSA’s and the labor movement’s shift to supporting the government’s war efforts, throughout the war years, she, Robert McElrath (whom she married in 1941), and Saiki continued to organize the islands’ cannery workers, which helped lay the foundation for the local strike wave of 1946 and 1947.

⁸ McElrath, interview by Roffman.

⁹ For the history of the rank-and-file social work movement, see Daniel Walkowitz, *Working with Class: Social Workers and the Politics of Middle-Class Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Patrick Selmi and Richard Hunter, “Beyond the Rank and File Movement: Mary van Kleeck and Social Work Radicalism in the Great Depression, 1931-1942,” *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare* 28, no. 2 (June 2001), 75-100.

The chapter's second half illustrates how McElrath and others in this Popular Front generation, including the ILWU's lawyer Harriet Bouslog, helped lead the union's postwar efforts to extend New Deal-era legislation and insist on an American national identity for Hawai'i's residents that would guarantee constitutional rights to immigrants and native-born people of color. It explores women's roles in the sugar strike of 1946 and the pineapple strike of 1947. McElrath, Bouslog, and other women provided key structures of support for these mass actions, running welfare services for thousands of strikers and their families, and representing protestors arrested for violating picketing injunctions. This half of the chapter also describes the role conservative women played as strikebreakers and anticommunist opponents of the union. A new organization, "We, the Women," claimed to symbolize gender solidarity, but mobilized protests and anti-strike activities against ILWU strikers and supporters, most of whom were women of color.

The ILWU-affiliated women formed their political visions, in part, through their experiences of gender discrimination and their campaigns for gender justice. Through those campaigns, they helped build one of the most enduring and effective movements for progressive political action in the twentieth-century United States, action that had its foundation in Popular Front organizing.

A Kalihi Kid in an American Colony

Ah Quon McElrath was born in Honolulu on December 15, 1915, the sixth of seven children. Through her teenage years in the 1920s and 1930s, she lived in a multiracial, working-class neighborhood, labored in pineapple canneries alongside predominantly female co-workers, and excelled in Hawai'i's class segregated public schools. She forged a vision of American

identity that was multiracial, multilingual, feminist, and inclusive of all *immigrants*. This identity oriented her radicalism, and formed the base of her battles to extend democratic rights and defeat white supremacy and discrimination in Hawai'i.

Her father, Leong Chew, and her mother, Leong Wong See, arrived on Hawaiian shores around the turn of the twentieth century amidst a surge of Chinese immigration to outposts of the American empire. Her parents left China separately, Leong Chew as a contract laborer, and Leong Wong See as a picture bride (but for a different groom) in 1902.¹⁰ In the U.S. Territory of Hawai'i, a small number of corporations with global interests and demanding stockholders presided over the islands' plantations, canneries, and waterfronts until the mid-1950s. As the president of one sugar company claimed, "the primary function of our plantations is not to produce sugar but to pay dividends."¹¹ The oligarchy's largest multinational companies and their industry associations controlled electoral politics, public and private police forces, and essentially all transportation to, between, and on the islands.¹² They were known simply as "The

¹⁰ Bureau of the Census, *1930 United States Federal Census*, Honolulu, Honolulu County, Hawaii Territory, Enumeration District: 0083, page 8A, FHL microfilm: 2342369. By 1900, Chinese women had immigrated to Hawaii in larger numbers than to the U.S. mainland (they made up 15% of the Chinese population compared to 5% in the U.S.). For more on Chinese women and immigration, see Judy Yung, *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America: A History* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015).

¹¹ Quoted in International Longshoremen's & Warehousemen's Union vs. Walter D. Ackerman, Jr., Attorney General of the Territory of Hawaii, (No. 828) (1948), Memorandum on the History of Labor and the Law in the Territory of Hawaii, US District Court, Ah Quon McElrath Papers, Labor History Archive, Center for Labor Education and Research, University of Hawai'i-O'ahu, Honolulu, Hawai'i (hereafter AQMP).

¹² For histories of Hawaii's labor force and political economy see Edward D. Beechert, "The Political Economy of Hawaii and Working Class Consciousness," *Social Process in Hawaii* 31 (1984), 162-165; Edward D. Beechert, *Working in Hawaii: A Labor History* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 1985); Moon-Kie Jung, *Reworking Race: The Making of Hawaii's Interracial Labor Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

Big Five.”¹³ In 1994, McElrath published an essay in which she quoted famed sugar baron Richard Cooke to describe how Hawai’i’s oligarchs viewed immigrants like her father. “I can see little difference between the importation of foreign laborers,” testified Cooke before the territorial legislature in 1930, “and the importation of jute bags from India.”¹⁴

The United States Congress had passed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, but even after it annexed Hawaii in 1898, American immigration laws often did not apply in the territory.¹⁵ Sugar and shipping industry officials carefully regulated the labor force’s demographics, aiming to divide their workers along racial lines to prevent labor solidarity and strikes, and create plantation family structures that would keep generations of immigrants tied to the land.¹⁶ In the early decades of the twentieth century, Japanese immigrants and their Hawaiian-born children became the territory’s largest ethnic group, but immigration from the Philippines, China, Korea, Puerto Rico, and Europe prevented any one ethnicity from becoming a majority. Only in the mid-1930s did Hawai’i’s open-door immigration policies shift to more limited restrictions on the entry of “foreign labor” and a reliance on Hawaiian-born citizen-workers and colonial subjects,

¹³ The Big Five companies were: Alexander & Baldwin, American Factors, Castle & Cooke, C. Brewer, and Theo Davies. For more information on these companies’ roles in Hawai’i’s economy and politics, see Sanford Zalburg, *A Spark is Struck!: Jack Hall & the ILWU in Hawaii* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1979); Jung, *Reworking Race*.

¹⁴ McElrath, “From Old to New Plantations,” 7; McElrath, “We gave workers a sense of dignity,” interview by Yung, 268.

¹⁵ For histories of Asian immigration to the United States, see Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore*; Gary Y. Okihiro, *The Columbia Guide to Asian American History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*.

¹⁶ Jung, *Reworking Race*, 188.

such as McElrath and her siblings.¹⁷

Poverty, family tragedy, and racial discrimination made her childhood difficult, but she also discovered a vibrant culture of community-building in her neighborhoods and first workplaces. Leong Chew, an itinerant laborer rather than a plantation field hand, worked as a “carpenter, hack driver, egg producer, gambler [and] alcohol maker,” she recalls. Family lore also had it that he spent time in jail, harassed by the local police for smoking opium, or just for being Chinese.¹⁸ In 1920, when she was four years old, her father died from a ruptured appendix. “We couldn’t afford a doctor,” she remembers, “and so he died at home.”¹⁹ As an adult, she came to understand her father’s death as preventable, if only he had had access to a doctor or a hospital. This traumatic experience is one of the many reasons for her lifelong commitment to fighting for affordable access to universal healthcare for Hawai’i’s working-class communities.

In many ways, McElrath had a typical first-generation-American childhood. She spoke her parents’ mother tongue at home, heard stories about deprivation back in the old county, and bore the family’s hopes and dreams of assimilation into a ‘better life.’ After her husband’s death, Leong Wong See, who had bound feet and spoke only Chinese, had seven children (between the ages of sixteen and three) to raise single-handedly after her husband’s death. For several years, she relied on Ah Quon’s older siblings, who shined shoes, sold newspapers, scavenged scrap

¹⁷ For more on Hawaii’s immigration and labor demographics in the 1920s and 1930s, see James H. Shoemaker, “Labor in the Territory of Hawaii,” 76th Congress, House Document No. 848, Bulletin no. 687 (Washington DC: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1939); E.J. Eagen and U.S. House Committee on Labor Board and Wagner Act, *Report of E. J. Eagen on the Hawaiian Islands* (May 3, 1940); Jung, *Reworking Race*, 55-72.

¹⁸ McElrath, “We gave workers as sense of dignity,” interview by Yung, 15.

¹⁹ Ah Quon McElrath, interview by Robert Mast, in *Autobiography of Protest in Hawaii*, edited by Robert H. and Anne B. Mast (University of Hawaii Press, 1996), 307.

metal, and trimmed pineapples in an industrial cannery to support the family.²⁰ At her mother's knee, McElrath heard tales of gender discrimination and poverty during Leong's youth in China. She remembers her mother talking "about the selling of girl children and even the committing of infanticide during periods of great drought and famine."²¹

"We were a truly bilingual family," she later recounted to interviewers.²² She attended Chinese language school for her early education and, as a young child, listened to her mother reading the Chinese newspaper or admonishing her and her siblings with Chinese aphorisms. In the 1920s and 1930s, Hawai'i was home to a plethora of non-English language newspapers with whole issues or several sections in Japanese or another language, including several radical and pro-labor publications, such as *Yōen Jihō* and *Hawaii Hochi*.²³ From an early age, she displayed a facility for bridging these ethnic and linguistic differences, which later made her a crucial asset to Hawai'i's labor and civil liberties movements. Her language and communication skills were hallmarks of her career as a social worker and labor activist. She "could talk any kind of pidgin, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Hawaiian," recalled a union member in 1999. "She can compete with anybody—lawyers, doctors. She's got the mind. We were lucky to have her."²⁴ In

²⁰ Ah Quon McElrath, interview by Harvey Schwartz, "Breaking Feudal Power in Hawaii: Interview with Ah Quon McElrath," *Social Policy* 33, no. 3 (Spring 2003), 21. Leong Wong See lost her sight a few years after the birth of her last child.

²¹ Ah Quon McElrath, "The Challenge is Still There," interview by Roffman, in *Rocking the Boat: Union Women's Voices, 1915-1975*, Brigid O'Farrell and Joyce L. Kornbluh, eds., (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 305-313.

²² McElrath, "We gave workers as sense of dignity," interview by Jung, 260; McElrath, interview by Roffman.

²³ Horne, *Fighting in Paradise*, 20.

²⁴ Bob Krauss, "Years Can't Slow Labor Fighter," *Honolulu Advertiser*, February 2, 1999.

Honolulu's working-class communities and on the islands' plantations, immigrants from different places learned to communicate in ways that forged a new identity in Hawaii.²⁵ For McElrath, this identity was not assimilationist, but multiracial and multilingual.

She formed her identity not only at home, but also in community and work. During the family's worst economic times in the 1920s, Leong Wong See sent McElrath and her siblings to live with friends or relations. By 1930, they had all reunited under one roof after McElrath's oldest sister secured a teaching position, and an older brother landed a job with the Honolulu's gas company, which provided employee housing in the city's working-class Kalihi neighborhood.²⁶ In the shadow of the gas works and the world's largest pineapple cannery, she grew up "among a variegated group of families—Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, Black, even some Russians."²⁷ She was keenly aware of racial hierarchies and discrimination in her neighborhood and schools, but she also recalled the sense of camaraderie among the families in the gas company housing. "We used to sit under the gaslight and read the newspapers to those individuals who couldn't read."²⁸

McElrath encountered this culture of kinship and community not only in her Kalihi neighborhood, but also in the pineapple cannery that loomed over the gas company grounds. Most summers during her adolescence, starting when she was thirteen, she joined a row of "girls

²⁵ Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore*, 168.

²⁶ Bureau of the Census, *1930 United States Federal Census*, Honolulu, Honolulu County, Hawaii Territory, Enumeration District: 0083, page 8A, FHL microfilm: 2342369, ancestry.com. Pooling their resources in the late 1930s, the Leong siblings collectively bought a plot of land near the University of Hawaii and built a small house for the family. McElrath, "The Challenge is Still There," 141.

²⁷ McElrath, interview by Mast, 306.

²⁸ McElrath, interview by Roffman.

in white aprons and white rubber gloves” on a pineapple production line or in the cannery’s cafeteria.²⁹ Canned pineapple juice had hit grocery stores in 1910, and the fruit quickly became a lucrative commodity, as well as a popular symbol depicting Hawaii as a pastoral and pre-modern paradise. “Sweetness comes naturally,” bragged one Dole tagline. The images of Hawaiian products marketed to mainland white middle-class consumers, however, did not match the reality of McElrath’s and other cannery workers’ industrial labor in the 1920s and 1930s.³⁰

The modern pineapple industry was central to the American colony, and its exploitation of colonial subjects who worked in Hawai’i’s fields and factories.³¹ Many of these colonial subjects were women like McElrath and her sisters, who earned very little under hazardous conditions. Cannery owner James D. Dole, “The Pineapple King,” defended his company’s paltry wages by insisting they represented ‘pin money’ for housewives whose husbands earned a family wage, and boasted that he generously provided medical services and cheap meals to his employees.³² In response, the *Hawaii Hochi* editorialized that the benefits Dole offered did not “make up for the shamefully low wages paid the girls for labor under a high-pressure speed-up system.”³³

²⁹ Shoemaker, “Labor in the Territory of Hawaii,” 103; McElrath, “We gave workers as sense of dignity,” interview by Yung, 261.

³⁰ For a discussion of the symbolism and meaning of pineapple products in American culture and imperialism, see Gary Y. Okihiro, *Pineapple Culture: A History of the Tropical and Temperate Zones* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

³¹ Okihiro, *Pineapple Culture*, 155.

³² Richard A. Hawkins, *A Pacific Industry: The History of Pineapple Canning in Hawaii* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 148.

³³ Hawkins, *A Pacific Industry*, 152.

The canneries were massive urban spaces, jam-packed with women for whom seasonal cannery work was a rite of passage.³⁴ During the height of the industry's production in the summer months, McElrath joined the hundreds of women and children who trimmed, sliced, and canned thousands of pineapples daily. The knives were razor sharp and the cored fruit slippery. The pineapples hurtled along conveyor belts, shot out of Gimaca coring machines at a rate of 105 per minute. The rhythms of the machines "calibrated the speed and tasks of humans who were bound to them in a relentless drive for production."³⁵ They rarely ceased. In 1930, one Honolulu cannery set a world record for the most pineapples canned in a day: almost 95,000 cases of tinned fruit.³⁶ "It was hard, physical work," McElrath later recalled, "and the acidic juice would run into my gloves and give me a rash."³⁷ In 1930, the U.S. Department of Labor reported that pineapple juice "eats into the cuticle and the hands become miserably sore, a condition painful for the worker and interfering with the efficient operation in the plant."³⁸

Modern technology, capitalism, and American imperialism shaped McElrath's and the other workers' experiences, but so did the community culture they created on the job. Her summers in the canneries, she later recalled, provided an "early lesson in the world of work [and] allowed me to meet many good people."³⁹ Despite the unsafe conditions, the women and girls

³⁴ Teresa Bill, "Into the Marketplace: Working-Class Women in 20th Century Hawai'i," *Labor's Heritage* 9, no. 1 (Summer 1997), 36.

³⁵ Okihiro, *Pineapple Culture*, 140.

³⁶ Okihiro, *Pineapple Culture*, 133.

³⁷ Wendy Koch, "Work as an Investment," *Honolulu Advertiser*, July 5, 1994.

³⁸ Caroline Manning, *The Employment of Women in the Pineapple Canneries of Hawaii* (Washington D.C.: United States Department of Labor, 1930), 19.

³⁹ Koch, "Work as an Investment."

chatted as their hands flew over the pineapples, telling each other where they were born, what kind of lives they had, where they had gone to school. They found ways to communicate across language barriers. “Either my neighbor tells me her life story,” one trimmer later described, “or I tells [sic] her mine. The time go [sic] fast. We keep talking or sing.”⁴⁰ In the canneries, as in the gas company worker housing, McElrath learned about the lives of the multiracial and multiethnic group of women around her. The ties she formed in the canneries later gave shape and impetus to her labor activism and Popular Front politics.⁴¹

Celebrated world records, racialized marketing campaigns, and gendered labor policies hid the punishing conditions that she and other young women of color encountered in Honolulu’s canneries, but in sharing the details of their lives with each other amidst those conditions, they planted the seeds for union organizing drives. When she organized cannery workers into union locals in the 1940s and 1950s, McElrath drew on the memories of the juice on her raw skin, the pittance in her wage packet, and the chatter in different languages on the lines. In the 1930s, her pay in the canneries did not provide much for her family, but she returned to work each summer for the little it did, because her labor helped put food on her family’s table and buy her school supplies. She pursued academic dreams and ambitions, but she never forgot the dangerous knives and fast moving conveyor belts, or the people she met in the canneries and under the gaslights in Kalihi.

⁴⁰ Michi Kodama-Nishimoto, Warren S. Nishimoto, and Cynthia A. Oshiro, eds., *Hanahana: An Oral History Anthology of Hawaii’s Working People* (Honolulu: Center for Oral History, University of Hawaii at Manoa, 1995), 12.

⁴¹ For a discussion of similar cannery culture in California’s industry, see Vicki Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives: Mexican Women, Unionization, and the California Food Processing Industry, 1930-1950* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987).

In the 1930s, Hawai'i's high school system graduated its first generation of students as part of the territory's twelve years of compulsory education mandate. Under the leadership of Republican Party activist Ruth Black, the Commission of Public Instruction set the curriculum at Honolulu's two public high schools. Roosevelt High, the so-called English Standard school, catered to the children of the professional-managerial class. McKinley High, nicknamed Tokyo High, served primarily Asian-American working-class students whose parents labored on plantations and waterfronts. The elite sent their own children to the private Punahou high school (which now counts Barack Obama as its most famous alumnus). At Roosevelt, the children of plantation managers and office secretaries studied a college preparatory curriculum that would gain them admission to the University of Hawai'i; at McKinley, the children of longshoremen and cannery workers received vocational training and lessons in citizenship. While the McKinley students learned about the Declaration of Independence in the classroom, many of them knew that democratic rights did not often extend to them or their families.⁴²

In 1931, sixteen-year-old McElrath enrolled at McKinley. A popular and talented student, she excelled in her classes and extra-curricula activities, writing and editing school newspapers, participating in student government, and becoming a champion debater.⁴³ In a citywide debate contest in 1933, her McKinley team, taking the affirmative side of the assigned topic "Resolved that Hawaii should be granted statehood," defeated the team from Roosevelt. "We beat the pants off them," she gleefully recounted sixty years later, still proud of besting her rivals who "looked down their noses at us because they spoke better English." She recalled, "There I was the lone

⁴² Quoted in Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore*, 173.

⁴³ "Citizenship Class," *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, May 12, 1932.

Chinese girl without any pedigree behind me.”⁴⁴ Her team may have won the debate, but she and other Hawaiian-born colonial subjects did not secure full United States citizenship rights until twenty-five years later, when in 1959 the Territory became America’s fiftieth state.⁴⁵

From her early childhood experiences in the gas workers’ communities and on the cannery production lines to her satisfaction at beating her debate opponents, McElrath constructed a vision of American working-class identity that embraced multiple languages, cultures, and nationalities. Later as an adult, she could, as one reporter put it in the 1980s, “talk like a Harvard grad or a Kalihi kid,” but for her, these were not mutually exclusive identities.⁴⁶ It was in part because she was a Kalihi kid that she became an accomplished professional and public intellectual with an honorary doctorate from the University of Hawai’i. Her sense of inclusion in a multiracial American national identity drove her, after high school, on a lifetime quest to secure guaranteed civil liberties for both immigrants and Hawai’i-born citizens. She started this journey at the University of Hawai’i and in Honolulu’s public parks and bookshops, where she met radical professors, communist seamen, and socialist saleswomen.

⁴⁴ “Statehood Debate,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, November 6, 1933; Krauss, “Years Can’t Slow Labor Fighter.”

⁴⁵ For example, although those born in Hawai’i had U.S. birthright citizenship as territory residents, they did not have a truly representative government until statehood. For more on citizenship rights in Hawaii, see Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*; Okihiro, *The Columbia Guide to Asian American History*.

⁴⁶ Susan Manuel, “Her Bottom Line is Human Rights,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin and Advertiser*, September 9, 1986.

The Making of a Young Communist

In 1938, McElrath graduated from the University of Hawai'i with a degree in sociology. As a college student she had joined the Communist Party, and walked her first picket lines. Her ambition was to apply to a graduate school, perhaps for an economics degree. However, after a professor told her that despite her intellectual promise she faced two insurmountable obstacles for further study ("One, you're a woman. Two, you're Oriental."), she devoted her formidable research talents and communication skills to a career in social work and the burgeoning labor movement.⁴⁷ New Deal legislation, such as the Social Security and the Wagner Acts, created new opportunities for women to find meaningful and effective work in government social welfare departments and secure union recognition through National Labor Relations Board elections. She seized both possibilities, volunteering as a researcher with Hawai'i's Department of Public Welfare until it hired her as a social worker in 1939, while giving the rest of her time to union organizing campaigns in Honolulu's department stores and on its waterfronts.

To keep abreast of world events she had begun visiting Honolulu's Aala Park and Dew Drop Inn bookshop, places where she first discovered the *Voice of Labor*, a local newspaper that communist union organizer Jack Hall had launched in 1935.⁴⁸ At rallies in the park, she heard stories about labor heroes from the famous West Coast waterfront battles of 1934, known as "The Big Strike," during which police in San Francisco shot and killed several picketers on "Bloody Thursday," (July 5) events that inspired a four-day general strike in that city. By 1938, several members of this "militant generation" of communist longshoremen who took part in that

⁴⁷ McElrath, interview by Roffman.

⁴⁸ McElrath, "We gave workers a sense of dignity," interview by Yung, 269-270. The *Voice of Labor* ran from 1935-1939.

strike—Jack Hall, Harry Kamoku (a longshoreman originally from Hilo), and Robert McElrath—had come ashore in Hawai'i and started organizing the Territory's waterfronts and plantations.⁴⁹ She volunteered with Hall and her future husband at the *Voice of Labor*, and was often, as she later recalled, “on call to give pep talks to dock workers on waterfronts, in churches and in homes.”⁵⁰

Hawai'i's radical women leaders did not have the same opportunities for political education as male leaders of the Party and the ILWU, some of whom had attended the California Labor School to take classes on Marxism, union organizing strategies, and labor history.⁵¹ Instead, McElrath found inspiration for her radicalism in reading social work theory, in work with Popular Front coalitions, and in fighting back against employers' structures of repression. She and other women activists, such as her socialist friend Rachel Saiki, forged their radical politics in the territory's Popular Front organizations, and in campaigns to unionize women workers in department stores and welfare offices. By the late 1930s, she was a familiar face at bargaining sessions and strike headquarters, as well as Aala Park rallies and radical newspaper offices.

In the pages of left wing publications she picked up at the Dew Drop Inn, she read plenty of stories about women radicals on the mainland and the islands. The *Daily Worker* covered

⁴⁹ For more on this generation of labor organizers, see Howard Kimeldorf, *Reds or Rackets?: The Making of Radical and Conservative Unions on the Waterfront* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 109; Bruce Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront: Seamen, Longshoremen, and Unionism in the 1930s*, (Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois, 1988); Jung, *Reworking Race*, 127.

⁵⁰ Krauss, “Years Can't Slow Labor Fighter.”

⁵¹ Jack Hall, Robert McElrath and Harry Kamoku all attended the CLS. Horne, *Fighting in Paradise*, 100-101.

Emma Tenayuca and Claudia Jones, among many others, on its national front pages, and the *Voice of Labor* published local accounts of women's leading union organizing drives and strikes in Hawai'i's laundries and forming Women's Auxiliaries in affiliation with the ILWU.⁵² McElrath also read *Social Work Today*, a national publication for the social work profession's radical-affiliated rank-and-file movement that offered a vision of social work grounded in organized labor, Popular Front coalitions, and government-provided social welfare programs.⁵³ She later remembered being "completely impressed with what I felt was a well-rounded, very broad conception of social work and what social workers could do."⁵⁴ In *Social Work Today*'s pages, she learned about international workers' movements, white-collar professional union organizing, and U.S. campaigns for relief and welfare legislation.⁵⁵ Two of the magazine's contributors, Mary van Kleeck and Bertha Reynolds, both prominent social reformers who

⁵² See, for example, "Hilo Ladies Auxiliary to affiliate with ILWU," *Voice of Labor*, February 24, 1938; "Militant Ladies Auxiliary Gives Big Impetus to Hilo Longshoremen: Drive to Organize All Union Families," *Voice of Labor*, November 10, 1938.

⁵³ For the history of the Rank-and-File social work movement, see Walkowitz, *Working with Class*; Selmi and Hunter, "Beyond the Rank and File Movement;" John Earl Haynes, "The 'Rank and File Movement' in Private Social Work," *Labor History* 16, no. 1 (Winter 1975), 78-98.

⁵⁴ McElrath, interview by Roffman.

⁵⁵ *Social Work Today*'s brief run lasted from 1937 to 1942. It published articles by radicals, labor leaders, and New Deal officials, including John L. Lewis and Frances Perkins. Anticommunist redbaiting ended both the publication and the rank and file movement in the 1940s. For more on *Social Work Today*, see Haynes, "The 'Rank and File Movement,'" 83-93; Walkowitz, *Working with Class*, 136-138, 190; Selmi and Hunter, "Beyond the Rank and File Movement," 88. Haynes argues that the publication's circulation dropped because it echoed the CPUSA's political directives, especially its support for the Nazi-Soviet Pact in 1940 and its initial opposition to the U.S.'s economic support for the allies.

affiliated with the Communist Party in the 1930s, inspired her to seek a career anchored in social work and community-labor organizing.⁵⁶

McElrath deepened her own vision of radical professionalism by joining the Honolulu chapter of the Inter-Professional Association (IPA) and the CPUSA shortly before graduating from college. “I was a member of the Communist Party,” she told an interviewer in 2005, “It’s no secret. I’ve been named. I can talk about it.”⁵⁷ The IPA was a Popular Front organization affiliated with the CPUSA that urged white-collar workers to join industrial unions embracing social justice and racial equality. It pressed the unemployed to make collective demands for more resources and federal legislation for jobs and relief from the federal government. Van Kleeck, whose writing in *Social Work Today* McElrath admired, had co-founded the IPA in 1934 together with Earl Browder, then the Communist Party’s chairman.⁵⁸ Reynolds, who alongside van Kleeck was a leading figure in the rank-and-file social work movement and the broader American Left, recalled hearing van Kleeck address workers in so-called professional fields (teachers and social workers, for example) at an IPA convention. Van Kleeck encouraged them,

⁵⁶ An influential social reformer, Mary van Kleeck (1883-1972) held numerous government and private sector positions in the fields of social work and women’s employment research, including the U.S. Department of Labor and the Russell Sage Foundation. Bertha Reynolds (1885-1978) was a pioneer social work practitioner and theorist. After Smith College fired her from its School of Social Work, she worked briefly with the United Mine Workers. For more on van Kleeck and Reynolds, see Selmi and Hunter, “Beyond the Rank and File Movement;” Walkowitz, *Working with Class*, 106, 138, 189-190; Sharon Freedburg, “Bertha Capen Reynolds and the Progressive Tradition in Social Work: From Professional Maverick to Forgotten Woman,” *Critical and Radical Social Work* 4, no. 2 (August 2016), 267-278).

⁵⁷ McElrath, interview by author.

⁵⁸ Denise M. Lynn, “Women on the March: Gender and Anti-fascism in American Communism, 1935-1939,” (Ph.D. dissertation, State University of New York, Binghamton, 2006), 58.

Reynolds remembered, to “study as never before the facts of economics and world history,” and “get into contact in their own communities with the protest movements of working people.”⁵⁹

Heeding this advice, the Honolulu IPA organizers brought together a coalition of communists, socialists, and progressives to discuss the pressing issues of the day—fascism, mass unemployment, and the Spanish Civil War, among others—and support the islands’ labor and civil liberties movements. In addition to McElrath, the IPA’s members included Rachel Saiki and a sociology professor, John Reinecke, as well as an architect, a medical doctor and several labor leaders, including Jack Hall.⁶⁰ “From the start,” recalled Reinecke who founded the Honolulu chapter and wrote for the *Voice of Labor*, the IPA “took a position openly and strongly in favor of the unions—something that only Communists would do in Hawaii.”⁶¹ Hawai’i’s CPUSA branch had relatively few participants, most likely no more than a few hundred card-carrying members even at the Party’s height of popularity in the 1940s. Yet local communists, socialists and other radicals had a lasting influence on the islands’ labor and civil liberties movements.

McElrath and the Popular Front Labor Movement

Efforts by IPA members and radical labor activists set the stage for three local organizing drives in 1938 and 1939—one well known, and two previously untold—that shaped McElrath’s Popular Front vision. As the first strike in Hawai’i’s history to succeed in building interracial

⁵⁹ Bertha C. Reynolds, *An Uncharted Journey: Fifty Years in Social Work* (New York: The Citadel Press, 1963), 158.

⁶⁰ Krauss, “Years Can’t Slow Labor Fighter.”

⁶¹ John E. Reinecke, *A Man Must Stand Up: The Autobiography of a Gentle Activist*, edited by Alice M. Beechert and Edward D. Beechert (Honolulu: Biographical Research Center, University of Hawaii, 1993), 30.

solidarity, the Inter-Island Steamship Company union campaign was a turning point that earned the ILWU a reputation as a militant union, and launched a wave of effective organizing throughout the islands.⁶² But Rachel Saiki's and McElrath's largely unrecognized attempts in these same years to organize workers in predominantly female occupations—first in Kress five-and-dime stores and then in the Department of Public Welfare—demonstrate that radical women reached across gender, racial, and class lines to tackle wage discrimination and community welfare issues as well.

In February 1938, Jack Hall, Robert McElrath, and Harry Kamoku, all communists, helped lead a multiracial strike by longshoremen who were demanding a closed shop and equal pay for equal work at the Inter-Island Steamship Company. In the face of the Big Five oligarchy and the majority ownership of Hawai'i's wealth by a white minority, workers' movements had attempted but failed to overcome the employers' arsenal of restrictive labor legislation, readily imported strikebreakers, and state-sanctioned violence by police and private security guards.⁶³

The Inter-Island Steamship Company campaign marked the first time that workers organized across race and nationality differences in Hawai'i. In response to the strike, the Inter-Island managers fired the strikers and demanded that the police arrest picketers for violating the territory's anti-picketing law of 1923. By the end of July 1938, the strike appeared doomed to fail as Inter-Island prepared to resume its shipping services among the islands, and to and from

⁶² Jung, *Reworking Race*, 127. For accounts of the Inter-Island organizing drive and strike, see Zalburg, *A Spark is Struck!*, 34-36; Horne, *Fighting in Paradise*, 27.

⁶³ Edward Johannessen, *The Hawaiian Labor Movement: A Brief History* (Boston: Bruce Humphries Inc., 1956), 65; Shoemaker, "Labor in the Territory of Hawaii," 196; Jung, *Reworking Race*, 113.

the mainland. The first ship carrying strikebreakers was scheduled to dock in Hilo, Harry Kamoku's hometown, on August 1.⁶⁴

As McElrath heard at a mass rally in Aala Park that evening, Kamoku and members of both the ILWU's Hilo local and its Ladies Auxiliary had decided to defy the anti-picketing law, and greet the strikebreakers with a peaceful sit-down protest of over two hundred demonstrators gathered at the Hilo waterfront. Formed a few months earlier, the Hilo Ladies Auxiliary had joined with their longshoremen fathers, brothers, and husbands to raise funds for a day-care center and other family-support services.⁶⁵ On August 1, fewer in number but equally militant, many of the women, wearing dresses and headscarves, sang as they approached the National Guardsmen, private security, and deputized vigilantes protecting the docked ship. At the guards' disposal were fifty-two riot guns, four sub-machine guns, many teargas canisters, and a fire truck. When the protesters refused to disperse, the security forces first attempted to drag away some of the sit-down demonstrators. Then they fired tear gas and buckshot into the crowd.⁶⁶

"We were marching down singing, and somebody yelled 'tear gas,'" one of the Hilo Ladies Auxiliary's leaders later testified before a grand jury. "It came like fireworks."⁶⁷ The

⁶⁴ A Communist Party member and San Francisco Big Strike alumnus, Harry Kamoku was born and raised in Hawai'i, the child of Chinese and Hawaiian parents. A talented organizer, he served as the President of the Hilo ILWU local and later as the President of the ILWU Longshoremen's Division. For more on Harry Kamoku, see Kimeldorf, *Reds or Rackets?*, 109; Horne, *Fighting in Paradise*, 33, 99; Jung, *Reworking Race*, 110.

⁶⁵ "Hilo Auxiliary Benefit," *Voice of Labor*, November 3, 1938.

⁶⁶ For accounts of the Hilo events, see William J. Puette, *The Hilo Massacre: Hawaii's Bloody Monday, August 1, 1938* (Honolulu: Center for Labor Education and Research, University of Hawaii, 1988); Zalburg, *A Spark is Struck!*, 37; Horne, *Fighting in Paradise*, 27.

⁶⁷ Statement of Mrs. Anna Kamahele (August 16, 1938), Attorney General Pau Case Files, Hawaii State Archives. The Grand Jury did not issue any indictments after its investigation found

police and Inter-Island's private guards wounded over fifty strike supporters on the Hilo waterfront that day, including the grand jury witness, whom they shot in the leg. In an echo of the West Coast waterfront strike of 1934, the Hilo confrontation became known as "Bloody Thursday." None of the fifty wounded died from their injuries, but several suffered permanent disability and the company's violent repression of peaceful demonstrators effectively ended the Inter-Island strike.

The union failed to secure equal wages with West Coast dockworkers, but the strike and the Hilo demonstration were nevertheless victories for racial and gender solidarity, and for the development of a class-consciousness that did not attempt to paper over racial differences. "It seems that in periods of intensive crisis, all people in the union—men, women, and children—are galvanized into action," recalled McElrath, "they're welded into a solid group because they realize where their class interests lie. And this is the kind of thing so heartening about the working class."⁶⁸ The famous strike ended with police violence, but it also offered incontrovertible truth that workers could stand together across gender, racial, and ethnic differences.

Battles over fair wages and working conditions happened not just on the waterfronts, but also in Hawai'i's department stores and public welfare offices, which both employed a number of Asian-American women. McElrath's IPA membership and her desire to help build the labor movement brought her into contact with other young radical women employed as salesclerks or social workers. At the same time as the Inter-Island strike and the Hilo solidarity events, she and

that a "state of emergency existed" during the incident, see *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, September 20, 1938.

⁶⁸ McElrath, interview by Roffman.

Saiki began working together on a campaign to organize the Kress five-and-dime stores in Honolulu and Hilo. The following year, she organized her co-workers in the Department of Social Security to make collective demands for both better wages and social welfare policies. Although they never achieved the fame of the ILWU's Inter-Island campaign, these two organizing drives tell a similar story of interracial and cross-gender solidarity in the making of a working-class consciousness in Hawai'i.

Rachel Kazuyo Saiki was born on July 4, 1919. Like her older comrade, she had come of age during the Great Depression and became a lifelong radical. "She had a philosophy she believed in," McElrath recalled, "and she kept with it."⁶⁹ Her father, Kosaku Saiki, emigrated from Japan in 1900. He first earned a living as a sugar laborer, then as a barber with his own shop, until he suffered a paralyzing stroke in 1934. Also a Japanese immigrant, her mother, Kiku Saiki, arrived in Hawai'i in 1914. The couple had four children; Rachel was their only daughter. Just fifteen when her father could no longer work, Saiki dropped out of high school to help support her parents and siblings. Like many Japanese and Japanese-American working-class women, she found jobs in the pineapple canneries and as a domestic in the private houses of the city's elite, while her mother took in laundry at the family's home near the Punchbowl volcano crater in Honolulu's Liliha neighborhood.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Vicki Viotti, "Activist Life: Rachel Saiki will be honored," *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, February 1, 1990.

⁷⁰ Bureau of the Census, *1930 United States Federal Census*, Honolulu, Honolulu, Hawaii Territory; Page: 24; Enumeration District: 0045; FHL microfilm: 2342368, ancestry.com. For information on Asian American women's employment in Hawai'i in the 1930s, see Megan Diskin Monahan, "Hawai'i's Twentieth Century Working Women: Labor Feminists in Their Own Right," (Ph.D. dissertation, Fordham University, 2015).

At the time of the Inter-Island Steamship campaign, Saiki was working as a cleaner at the soda fountain department in Honolulu's Kress Store. Kress workers and communist supporters had been protesting outside the national five-and-dime chain for several years, leading to mass demonstrations in Harlem in 1935, for instance. In the spring of 1938, Saiki and several co-workers staged a brief walkout to protest the "unreasonable demands of the head of that department."⁷¹ The manager's demands were sexual. "If the girls didn't give him a date," she later recalled, "he would give them a hard time."⁷²

The protests against this harassment drew the attention of the CIO-affiliated United Retail and Wholesale Employees of America (URWE) whose leaders recruited Saiki to organize the Honolulu Kress Store for an NLRB election. The retail clerk men and fountain department women hoped to negotiate a contract that would both provide pay equity with Kress's San Francisco employees—who earned \$15 per week, almost double the wages of their Hawai'i counterparts—and adhere to New Deal labor codes, such as a 44-hour workweek. In mid-April 1938, the workers announced they had formed URWE Local 235, and had filed for an NLRB election. One week later, management fired Saiki and six others, two men and four women, all Asian Americans.⁷³ The NLRB held the election in May, and the vote resulted in a dramatic 78-78 tie, but only after Kress disallowed the ballots that Saiki and the other fired activists had cast. In response, the union filed a discrimination case with the NLRB. Although the Board ruled that

⁷¹ Harold Morse, "Memorial Today for Labor Activist Saiki," *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, September 9, 2000.

⁷² Viotti, "Activist Life: Rachel Saiki will be honored."

⁷³ "Kress Workers Tell of Firings," *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, November 18, 1939.

the disallowed votes be counted, its decision did not extend to ordering Kress to reinstate Saiki and the other fired workers.⁷⁴

Forced to recognize Local 235's legal right to represent the workers, Kress then stalled at the bargaining table. McElrath and John Reinecke joined Saiki on the union's negotiating team in June 1938.⁷⁵ This experience gave them front row seats to management's colonialist, racist defense of its paltry, discriminatory wages, as well as the limits of the Wagner Act's shortcomings when employers refused to bargain in good faith. Kress management ignored the workers' claims of sexual harassment, and counter-offered \$9 for a 48-hour week.⁷⁶ The New Deal's Fair Labor Standards Act took effect in October that year, but the legislation did not cover most retail workers, and the Kress wages continued to be less than the federal government's mandated industry minimum. "Islanders don't work like mainlanders do," one Kress negotiator claimed, invoking race through the language of American imperialist geography.⁷⁷ To justify its demands, the union's negotiating committee insisted that the mostly Japanese-American workers be included in American national identity. The *Voice of Labor* backed them up: the Kress Company, it reported, "seems to feel that these young American high school graduates can attain an American standard of living with such a pittance."⁷⁸ As much as a dispute over hours and

⁷⁴ "Kress Union Ballot Results in 78-78 Tie," *Honolulu Advertiser*, May 28, 1938; "Kress Official Denies Unfair Labor Tactics," *Honolulu Advertiser*, November 30, 1939; McElrath, interview by author.

⁷⁵ Reinecke, *A Man Must Stand Up*, 88.

⁷⁶ "Honolulu Kress Company Denies Local Workers Half S.F. Scale," *Voice of Labor*, November 17, 1938.

⁷⁷ Reinecke, *A Man Must Stand Up*, 32.

⁷⁸ "Kress Unionists Fighting Against Wholesale Firing, Discrimination," *Voice of Labor*, November 10, 1938.

wages, these negotiations represented a conflict over what it meant to be an American and who was allowed to be one.

News of the police attack on peaceful protestors on the Hilo waterfront in August in 1938 did not deter McElrath and Saiki from their attempts to win a contract for Kress workers, despite the company's intransigence throughout the fall of that year. By December, the Kress workers had had enough. When news came that the store's employees in San Francisco had successfully ended a two-month strike and negotiated a contract that guaranteed a \$20 weekly wage (twice the labor code's 25 cents an hour minimum) and a 40-hour workweek, a number of the Hilo Kress employees—women and men—decided to walk out too. A few days before Christmas, both retail clerks and lunch-counter waitresses went on strike for wage parity with their San Francisco counterparts, and to demand that Kress reinstate Saiki and the other fired activists. In turn, the negotiating committee renewed their demands for equal pay for equal work, but to little avail. As one union leader observed, management will “bargain and bargain but they won't give anything important. This technique, just enough to meet the Wagner Act, is devastating.”⁷⁹

On January 18, 1939 several weeks into the strike, Harry Kamoku, now the president of ILWU Local 36, organized a solidarity action with the Kress strikers, just as he had in support of the Inter-Island campaign. Some 200 longshoremen refused to unload Kress cargo, shutting down the Hilo port. In leaflets written in English, Japanese, and Ilocano, he made the case for the dockworkers to support the young men and women on strike against Kress.⁸⁰ The ILWU's

⁷⁹ Edward D. Beechert, “Racial Divisions and Agricultural Labor Organizing in Hawaii,” in James C. Foster, ed., *American Labor in the Southwest: The First One Hundred Years* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1982), 131.

⁸⁰ “Hilo Longshoremen Still Locked Out,” *Voice of Labor*, January 19, 1939; “Labor Strike at Hilo,” *Honolulu Advertiser*, January 18, 1939.

solidarity strike lasted a week. This multiracial group of longshoremen, saleswomen, and stock clerks stood together to protest Kress's strategy of stalling at the bargaining table, but they could not overcome management's threat to fire striking or protesting workers. By the end of January, the Kress strikers had returned to the lunch counter and the sales floors without a pay raise or a union contract.

With direct strike action at Kress stymied, Saiki and Local 235 filed a discrimination case with the NLRB in 1939.⁸¹ Meanwhile, she continued participating in campaigns to organize Honolulu's cannery and waterfront workers, alongside Robert McElrath, whom Ah Quon married two years later. In 1941, Saiki was serving as Local 235's secretary-treasurer when, after a two year wait, the NLRB finally awarded her and five others \$10,000 in back pay, and ordered Kress to reinstate them all.⁸² Following the NLRB decision, she returned to the fountain department. She stayed with Kress until 1945 when she gave birth to a son whom she raised as a single parent. Local 235, however, had dissolved in 1944. In the end, New Deal protections under the Wagner Act and the Fair Labor Standards Act did little to help the Kress workers win their immediate demands. Like the Inter-Island Steamship strike, however, their actions proved that workers would organize together across race and gender lines to fight collectively for fair wages and just treatment.

The third organizing drive that shaped McElrath's Grassroots Popular Front politics occurred in her own workplace. After graduating from the University of Hawai'i in 1938, she

⁸¹ "Kress Personnel Setup Aired in NLRB Trial," *Honolulu Advertiser*, November 18, 1939; "NLRB Finishes in Kress Case," *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, November 28, 1939.

⁸² Reinecke, *A Man Must Stand Up*, 32; "Kress Unions Agree to Back Wage Decree," *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, December 4, 1941. In 1957, Saiki donated the remaining funds awarded to the union to charity. "Union Group gives TB Association \$233," *Honolulu Advertiser*, December 28, 1957.

spent a decade employed as a social worker for the territory's Department of Social Security, where she attempted to put into practice the theories she had read about in *Social Work Today*, especially the ideas set forth by van Kleeck and Reynolds.⁸³ These two social reformers and IPA members had criticized New Deal welfare programs as inadequate in addressing mass poverty, economic crises, and attacks on workers' rights. Additionally, they believed that social workers should organize into unions and create a national welfare rights movement.⁸⁴ "By becoming part of the labor movement," van Kleeck wrote in *Social Work Today*, social workers are "strengthened in their advocacy, and they may in time broaden the scope and increase the effectiveness of the trade unions in the development of a social program."⁸⁵ Similarly, in 1938, the *Voice of Labor* reported on the Inter-professional Association's commitment to "organize professional people into effective labor organizations so as to better the incomes and working conditions of the professional groups."⁸⁶ Eager to do her part, McElrath organized her fellow workers—both clerical and professional staff—into a new collective, the Department of Social Security Employees Association.⁸⁷ For a few years, the Association published a newsletter and took stands on a number of social welfare issues, but it never affiliated with a national union.⁸⁸

⁸³ McElrath took unpaid maternity leave after the births of her daughter in 1943 and her son in 1945.

⁸⁴ Walkowitz, *Working with Class*, 136-138; Selmi and Hunter, "Beyond the Rank and File Movement," 76-77.

⁸⁵ Mary van Kleeck, "Should Social Work Employees Use Labor Tactics?," *Social Work Today* 4, no. 1 (January 1936), 6.

⁸⁶ "Teachers Must Enter Politics," *Voice of Labor*, September 1, 1938.

⁸⁷ McElrath, interview by Roffman; McElrath, interview by Mast, 309.

⁸⁸ McElrath, interview by author.

Overworked and underpaid, she and other members of the Employees' Association advocated not only for lower caseloads and higher wages, but also for improvements in social welfare programs for their clients. "We raised questions about job classification, wage rates, discrimination against public welfare clients on housing," she later recalled.⁸⁹ Hawai'i's social workers and radical newspapers bore witness to the territory's scant resources for its working-class population. "The worst thing is the rent...They come to us and we can't help them," one young caseworker told the *Voice of Labor*.⁹⁰ The department oversaw some of Honolulu's public housing and when it proposed a rent increase, McElrath and her co-workers protested. "People who were living in public housing received very small grants," she remembered, "and [the department] should not raise the amounts of rent they were charging the women."⁹¹ The protests worked, blocking the rent hike.

The Employees' Association had a few early successes, but did not last long. Many of her college-educated co-workers embraced a professional caseworker identity that emphasized difference from, rather than solidarity with, their welfare clients or less educated co-workers. She discovered that organizing a group of women across class lines was easier to read about in the pages of *Social Work Today* than done in practice. "The professionals were so well-programmed into thinking their needs were different from those of the clerical workers," she recalled, "that we could never bridge the gap between those two groups of workers."⁹² For a number of years,

⁸⁹ McElrath, "The Challenge is Still There," 142.

⁹⁰ "64 More Persons Begin to Starve in May: Oahu Welfare Head Declares Department Needs \$300,000 More to Provide for Needy," *Voice of Labor*, June 8, 1939.

⁹¹ McElrath, "The Challenge is Still There," 142.

⁹² McElrath, interview by Roffman. For class identity formation in social work, see Walkowitz, *Working with Class*.

however, she was part of the influential rank-and-file social work movement with a radical analysis and thousands of members nationwide.

At its height in the 1940s, the rank-and-file social work movement had significant influence with pro-New Deal politicians and national social service administrators.⁹³ Although in Hawai'i the movement never reached beyond her short-lived efforts at the Department of Social Security, McElrath's direct experiences and her knowledge of the larger movement defined her expectations for robust social welfare programs and her faith in the efficacy of collective action in building solidarity across race, gender, and class differences. As with other radical-affiliated organizations, a redbaiting backlash against demands for expanded public welfare programs and workers' rights decimated the national rank and file movement. It is also likely that with its turn to support the war effort after 1941, the CPUSA abandoned its support for the radical social work movement and its periodical. *Social Work Today* published its last issue in 1942.

Yet, following in the footsteps of other radical social reformers and social workers, McElrath found ways to bring her skills as a social worker and her Popular Front visions into collaborations with left-wing labor unions, particularly during collective actions. "Social work has to find its place among other movements for human betterment," Reynolds had written, "to be concerned with civil rights, equality of opportunity, decent housing, public health, and community sharing of common hazards like unemployment, sickness, and old age."⁹⁴ While organizing her co-workers to protest rent increases, McElrath also volunteered her services to striking longshore workers in 1940, and participated in labor-led voter registration and other

⁹³ Walkowitz, *Working with Class*, 136.

⁹⁴ Reynolds, *An Uncharted Journey*, 174. For more on Reynolds's ideology, see Bertha Capen Reynolds, "The American Family and Socialism," in *Toward a Socialist America*, edited by Helen Alfred, (New York: Peace Publications, 1958), 30-40.

political campaigns to win power for Hawai'i's working class. As a social worker and a radical activist in the 1940s, she fought for union contracts and for legislation that would guarantee affordable housing, unemployment insurance, and the protection of free speech.

She thus played a major role in building a new working-class consciousness based in interracial and cross-gender solidarity among Hawai'i's workers before the outbreak of World War II, bolstered in part, as other scholars have shown, by liberal New Deal legislation and by closer ties to mainland institutions, such as the ILWU and the CPUSA.⁹⁵ The ILWU and the CPUSA leaders and members championed interracialism as an essential strategy for the movements and campaigns taking on Hawai'i's business and political elite.

McElrath set an early standard for the significant roles that Communist-led unions and women activists played in the strikes and organizing campaigns during the war period, campaigns that led to the development of Hawai'i's much celebrated working-class interracial solidarity. Although the Wagner Act excluded some types of work, most notably agricultural and domestic labor, Jack Hall and Robert McElrath used the Act's protection of the right to organize to begin a campaign to unionize Hawai'i's plantations. They recruited cannery and other non-agricultural workers on Kauai's Kalaheo pineapple plantation to join a local of the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA), which won an NLRB election in 1939 and the first contract on any Hawaiian plantation in 1940. The *Voice of Labor* reported that a Hawaiian woman from the cannery cast the first vote.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Beechert, "Political Economy," 165; Jung, *Reworking Race*, 108; Horne, *Fighting in Paradise*, 44. Sociologist Moon-Hie Jung uses the term interracialism—workers aligning their race and class interests—to describe Hawai'i's powerful labor movement and political community that crossed racial boundaries.

⁹⁶ *Voice of Labor*, 1939; Joyce A. Matsumoto, *The 1947 Hawaiian Pineapple Strike* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Industrial Relations Center, 1958), 4.

Another history-making event in 1940 was the first interracial strike of Hawai'i's plantation workers. When Hawaiian, Japanese, and Filipino longshore workers went on strike at Port Allen-Ahukini on Hawai'i's Kauai Island, the employers evicted the strikers and their families from the company's racially and ethnically segregated plantation shacks. In response, rank-and-file leaders of the ILWU organized all the workers to relocate together in a strike camp. "They lived in a huge skating-rink and men and women of every ethnic group together cooked their meals," McElrath remembered. They "developed a camaraderie and a feeling of community that they probably never had before."⁹⁷

As the communists' *Kauai Herald* reported in a series of articles about the strike, women played leading roles in strike committees to plan picketing, cooking, and other support activities.⁹⁸ Like the Inter-Island strike a few years earlier, the Kauai strike demonstrated the ability of workers to overcome racial and ethnic differences and organize together. The strikers secured union recognition and a small wage increase, but their greater success flowed from the example of racial solidarity the strike provided the nascent labor movement.

Once the United States entered World War II, the federal government declared martial law in Hawai'i and passed the Hawaii Defense Act, which wiped out any existing civil liberties and labor rights in the territory. Under military rule and the newly established Labor Control Board, local government led by the Big Five gained total authority over Hawai'i's workforce. The Board passed regulations that required all workers to register with the U.S. Employment Service, forbade unions from collecting dues, froze wages, and introduced jail sentences for

⁹⁷ McElrath, interview by Roffman, 38.

⁹⁸ "Ahukini Strike Situation Unchanged," *Kauai Herald*, July 26, 1940.

workers absent from their assigned jobs.⁹⁹ The government and employers took advantage of these rules to reassign non-agricultural sugar and pineapple workers from the plantations to more highly skilled jobs on the docks, but continued to pay those workers plantation-level wages. During a war popularly remembered as the salvation of democracy, Hawai'i became something more akin to an authoritarian labor camp.

Still, McElrath used her social work and union organizing experiences to bring hundreds of workers, many of them women of color, into the labor movement. Despite the Labor Control Board's restrictive policies and national labor leaders' directives, she and her husband formed the independent Marine Engineers and Drydock Workers Union, "only union set-up going at the time," she later recalled.¹⁰⁰ Together they organized non-agricultural workers in pineapple canneries, tuna packing sheds, and on the piers.¹⁰¹ Relying on kinship connections and her own work experiences, she convinced women cannery workers and the "wives of the longshoremen to get them to get their husbands" to join the union.¹⁰²

By 1944, the McElraths, Rachel Saiki, and rank-and-file workers had successfully organized Hawai'i's largest cannery, the Hawaiian Pineapple Company's plant in Honolulu, where Ah Quon had first trimmed fruit as a teenager. McElrath recalled the campaign as a family affair. "My sister and her husband worked at the company," she later told an interviewer.

"[T]hey moved in with us for a short while. We talked about why it is was important to have a

⁹⁹ Johannessen, *The Hawaiian Labor Movement*, 94; ILWU vs. Ackerman, AQMP.

¹⁰⁰ McElrath, interview by Schwartz, 21.

¹⁰¹ Zalburg, *A Spark is Struck!*, 71; McElrath, interview by Schwartz; McElrath, "The Challenge is Still There," 144.

¹⁰² McElrath, interview by Yung, 262.

union.”¹⁰³ Within a few months, the non-agricultural employees at all eight canneries in the fish and pineapple industries had voted in NLRB elections to join the Marine Engineers and Drydock Workers Union.

McElrath and rank-and-file women cannery workers fought to have their jobs reclassified from seasonal to intermittent so that women, who far outnumbered men in high-season positions, could gain healthcare and seniority rights, and have access to unemployment benefits during the off-season. By 1945, women made up fifty percent of the cannery industry’s workforce in the summer and represented the largest increase in union members during the war.

These wartime organizing campaigns of women cannery workers became part of the foundation for the radical-led Hawaiian labor movement’s later successes in campaigns for universal healthcare and unemployment insurance.¹⁰⁴ As radical dissenters who continued to organize despite the lack of support from the national labor movement, the McElraths and rank-and-file workers attempted to expand workplace democracy for wartime workers. Ah Quon McElrath’s actions certainly added to her reputation as, to quote one journalist, a woman “sometimes more militant than the men who were the [ILWU’s] leaders.”¹⁰⁵

McElrath’s Postwar Grassroots Labor Organizing

From the late 1930s onward, the McElraths and other union leaders had known that breaking the Big Five’s political and economic power would require organizing workers for political as well as workplace democracy. As a Popular Fronter, Ah Quon McElrath believed that

¹⁰³ McElrath, interview by Roffman, 22.

¹⁰⁴ McElrath, interview by author.

¹⁰⁵ Krauss, “Years can’t slow labor fighter.”

unions were the engines of social progress, but only if they saw their members as “whole workers” and organized local communities as well as shop floors and agricultural fields. Beginning in 1938, the union ran an extensive political program, and by 1945, the ILWU and its allies had won their first significant legislative victory: the Hawaii Employment Relations Act, better known as the Little Wagner Act, which extended labor organizing rights to the territory’s agricultural workers and helped spark a wave of successful NLRB elections in the sugar and pineapple industries.¹⁰⁶

By 1946, thirty-one-year-old McElrath had almost a decade’s worth of experience as a social worker and a union organizer, but she did not have a permanent compensated job and was now a mother to two small children. That summer, she volunteered with the ILWU as the union prepared for a strike that would cover 28,000 workers on twenty-six sugar plantations across the islands. “With all the care of a military commander plotting a major invasion,” huffed the *Wall Street Journal* not five years after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the ILWU was “sending out squads of organizers and interpreters to preach the strike gospel” to workers who “can’t read, write, or understand the English language [as] a majority are Filipinos and Orientals.”¹⁰⁷ While some strikers spoke pidgin English, Japanese, Ilocano, or Visayan and needed McElrath’s and fellow rank-and-filers’ multilingual skills, others had been born in Hawai’i to immigrant parents, which made them, like McElrath, American citizens educated in the Islands’ English-language schools.¹⁰⁸ A number of these sugar workers were, of course, U.S. military veterans who did not

¹⁰⁶ Horne, *Fighting in Paradise*, 114.

¹⁰⁷ Millard Purdy, “Trouble in Hawaii,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 15, 1946.

¹⁰⁸ McElrath, “From Old to New Plantations,” 10.

need an interpreter to explain why the union was willing to strike in order to end racial segregation in plantation jobs and housing.

The ILWU and the sugar workers' main bargaining priority was the end of the 'company town' system that gave employers complete private ownership of all plantation services—police, housing, stores—as well as control over the working conditions in the fields. Their contract demands included racial and ethnic desegregation in plantation housing; a ban on discrimination on the grounds of race, creed, color, political belief, or union activity; and the creation of a joint employer-union body to oversee the allocation of housing and medical care funds. Up against a formidable and well-financed employer consortium, the Hawaiian Sugar Planters Association (HPSA), the ILWU needed every resource at its disposal to win its demands, especially if the companies followed through on their threat to evict all the workers and their families in the event of a strike. An industry-wide organization, the HPSA employed armed guards and private detectives to patrol plantations and investigate union activists, exerting its political clout to ensure the passage of anti-labor legislation.¹⁰⁹

Although the ILWU's elected leadership and staff organizer jobs remained closed to women for decades, McElrath and a number of other women, including ILWU lawyer Harriet Bouslog, played significant roles in the success of the historic sugar campaign in 1946. The 79-day strike, one historian recounts, marked the beginning of Hawai'i's transformation from "an apartheid outpost to the closest thing to social democracy under the U.S. flag."¹¹⁰ It was the first industry-wide action on the islands' plantations, and McElrath brought her intellectual

¹⁰⁹ For more on the sugar strike, see Zalburg, *A Spark is Struck!*, 139-159; *Rice & Roses: The 1946 Great Hawaii Sugar Strike*, directed by Joy Chong-Stannard, (Center for Labor Education & Research, University of Hawaii, 1996).

¹¹⁰ Horne, *Fighting in Paradise*, 23.

commitment to civil rights, housing, and public health, as well as her practical organizing, social work, and linguistic skills, to the union's preparations. In charge of welfare services for the strike, she designed and implemented relief policies and programs for the twenty-eight thousand strikers, plus tens of thousands of their family members.

On the first day of the strike, September 1, 1946, hundreds of women and children marched in Hilo and other island towns to show their support for the strikers. For the next two months, McElrath and other women prepared meals in community soup kitchens, volunteered at churches in exchange for donations, performed in talent shows and baseball games, and distributed labor and radical newspapers and strike leaflets, published in multiple languages. When the HPSA secured an injunction against picketing on the plantations, women joined strikers in marches and parades around city buildings.¹¹¹ In response to one company official's decision to prevent the sale of rice stored in the plantation's warehouse, women staged a protest outside the storage building.¹¹²

In the midst of the strike, the ILWU needed a good defense lawyer to represent the hundreds of union members and community allies burdened with serious criminal charges stemming from arrests during the months-long conflict. The union found one in Harriet Bouslog. "What she did laid the model for subsequent actions in civil liberties and self-determination," McElrath later told a reporter. "She had the kind of creative intellect that led her to interpret the law very differently."¹¹³

¹¹¹ Louis Goldblatt, "Working Class Leader in the ILWU, 1935-1977," oral history transcript, Regional Oral History Office, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 388.

¹¹² Reinecke, *A Man Must Stand Up*, 50.

¹¹³ Mary Adamski, "Attorney fought for underdogs," *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, September 15, 1999.

Harriet (Williams) Bouslog had first arrived in Honolulu, where her husband had accepted a teaching position at the University of Hawai'i, in September 1939, a few weeks after the "Bloody Thursday" violence on the Hilo pier. Born in 1912, she had earned a law degree from the University of Indiana in 1936, the sole woman in the law school's graduating class. She passed the Hawai'i bar exam in 1941, only the eighth woman to do so. After leaving the islands at the start of World War II, she worked as a lobbyist for the ILWU's international office in Washington DC for several years, but returned to Honolulu in October 1946 at the ILWU's request.¹¹⁴

To win the workers' proposals, the union had to disarm the industry's main weapons: family evictions from plantation housing and the territory's draconian anti-labor and racially discriminatory laws. McElrath's organizing experiences were crucial to the union's victory.¹¹⁵ She and the ILWU Women's Auxiliaries' rank-and-file leaders researched weekly food necessities for each family, planned cheap but nutritious meals for communal soup kitchens, and convinced local farmers to donate land for strike vegetable gardens.¹¹⁶ The women's efforts allowed the ILWU to claim credibly that if the sugar employers evicted just one striker from plantation housing all the families would, as ILWU leader Louis Goldblatt remembered, "empty out and go to the county, city hall, or state building and camp out and tell [the government]

¹¹⁴ Teresa Bill, "An Advocate for all Hawaii;" Esther K. Arinaga, "Harriet Bouslog: Lawyer, Risk Taker, and Champion of the Underdog," in *Biography Hawaii: Five Lives*, pamphlet, AQM Papers; Mari J. Matsuda, "Harriet Bouslog" in *Called from Within: Early Women Lawyers of Hawai'i*, ed. Mari J. Matsuda (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1992); Barbara J. Falk, "Harriet Bouslog: Labor Attorney and 'Champagne Socialist,'" *Hawaiian Journal of History*, vol 50 (2016): 103-120.

¹¹⁵ Horne, *Fighting in Paradise*, 99.

¹¹⁶ McElrath, interview by Roffman.

‘Okay you feed us.’”¹¹⁷ Shifting the welfare of roughly a fifth of Hawai’i’s population from the sugar employers’ responsibility to the territory’s officials would have created a crisis for the government and driven a wedge between the state and the sugar industry’s corporate owners.

Shortly after the strike began, it gained international support from workers in the world’s other top sugar producers: Cuba and Puerto Rico. The ILWU’s international president, Harry Bridges, held a press conference with representatives of both the Cuban Federation of Sugar Workers and Puerto Rico’s General Confederation of Workers’ Unity Committee. Leaders of the three unions publicly threatened to coordinate a collective action if the HPSA did not settle favorably with Hawai’i’s striking workers.¹¹⁸ Strikes in maritime and transportation industries on the mainland also slowed cane sugar deliveries from Cuba and Puerto Rico and sugar from refineries on the West Coast.

By mid-November, a sugar shortage loomed and consumers in places as far from Honolulu as New York City complained about saccharine pills in bitter coffee and the absence of pineapple ice cream at their favorite hotels. Despite the local injunctions and arrests, the islands’ labor-community alliances held firm. The employers caved. “This victory makes Hawaii a part of the United States for all Hawaiians, especially the workers,” crowed Bridges on November 15, “It is no longer a feudal colony. It should now be a State of the United States, not a Territory.”¹¹⁹

The sugar workers secured over \$10 million in wage and benefit increases but, equally important, the strike demonstrated the strength of racial and ethnic solidarity among the workers,

¹¹⁷ Harvey Schwartz, “Breaking Feudal Power in Hawaii: Interview with Louis Goldblatt,” *Social Policy* 33, no. 3 (Spring 2003), 25.

¹¹⁸ “Bridges Promotes Unions in Sugar,” *New York Times*, September 7, 1946.

¹¹⁹ “Strikers Speed Sugar Peace Poll, Agreement Ending Long Tie-Up on Hawaii Plantations Means Pay Rise of \$10,500,000” *New York Times*, November 16, 1946.

and the new contract guaranteed shared control over plantation housing and healthcare resources. Pensions, housing, and medical care costs all became subject to collective bargaining, no longer issues decided at the employers' sole discretion. Workers' self-determination, or in Jack Hall's words, their ability to "guide their own destinies" was a crucial outcome of the strike.¹²⁰ The sugar strike confirmed a multiracial working-class solidarity central to the ILWU and its political culture, one that the women who led the community organizing so crucial to victory had been practicing for years.

The sugar strike, McElrath later stated, "solidified certainly my own thinking about the need to organize workers into unions and to bring their families into the whole process."¹²¹ It was McElrath, one journalist wrote, who "got the union to involve itself in more than hours and wages, to regard each member as part of a family."¹²² These programs set the terms for healthcare and housing demands in negotiated union contracts and territory legislation for decades. Demanding full citizenship rights for Hawai'i's multiracial working class (including its many foreign-born), she and other grassroots Popular Front organizers were expanding workplace and political democracy in Hawai'i decades before the territory became a state in 1959.

Women activists in mid-century Hawai'i were not all radicals or progressives, however. Conservative women mobilized as strike breakers, and launched anticommunist attacks against the labor and civil liberties movements. Some joined women-only business and professional organizations to mobilize against the ILWU's collective actions and political influence. In

¹²⁰ Johannessen, *The Hawaiian Labor Movement*, 122.

¹²¹ McElrath, interview by Roffman.

¹²² Krauss, "Years can't slow labor fighter."

response to the strike wave of 1946, Ruth Black, a prominent Republican, founded “We, the Women,” an organization that recruited elite and professional women to cross picket lines and protest outside the ILWU offices in attempts to shift community support away from the union and its members during strikes. As the director of the islands’ Commission of Public Instruction for twelve years, Black wielded significant influence over the territory’s communities and education system. When Hawai’i’s transit, gas company, and sugar workers all struck or threatened to strike during contract negotiations, We, the Women members retaliated with an anticommunist campaign designed to overturn all of what Hawai’i’s working-class women had accomplished.¹²³

We, the Women leaders tried to frame their organization as a vessel for gender solidarity. At the group’s inaugural meeting, they proudly observed that its members “came together from every racial group and every strata of society to meet as sisters on an equal plane.”¹²⁴ Placing gender above any race or class differences, they touted sisterhood as their reason for banding together against strikes and leftwing political action. This would put them in direct conflict with the ILWU’s multiracial Women’s Division Committee and Women’s Auxiliaries, which brought together radical and progressive women to build working-class power, conduct voter registration drives, and run for local positions in city government and the local Democratic Party.

Key members of We, the Women came from elite Hawaiian families, members of the “Big Five” white oligarchy families that employed mostly Japanese-American domestic servants. The organization’s leaders included prominent wealthy territory government officials such as

¹²³ “We, the Women Letter to the Governor,” *Honolulu Advertiser*, July 25, 1946; “Ruth Black dies at 83,” *Honolulu Advertiser*, November 22, 1974.

¹²⁴ “We, the Women of Honolulu,” *Honolulu Advertiser*, July 28, 1946.

Republican senator Thelma Akana. Not all of the We, the Women's members had wealth and influence. Many earned a living in an office or a school, or worked directly for a fellow member's husband. A survey of the organization's membership in 1947 found that a minority listed their occupation as "housewife" and more than half held low paying "middle-class" jobs, working as beauticians, teachers, social workers, and stenographers.¹²⁵ Claiming to speak on behalf of all the territory's inhabitants, We, the Women's leaders promised that the group would "take action regarding the everyday problems of Hawaii's people" and "become a tremendous power for good in every island community."¹²⁶

Less than a year after the end of the victorious sugar strike, pineapple workers attempted their own industry-wide action. Building on radicals' successful workplace and political organizing during the war, year-round pineapple workers in the fields and the canneries now had union representation across the islands. In the face of martial law and other restrictions on the right to organize, McElrath and her husband, along with Rachel Saiki, had joined with rank-and-file workers to organize successful NLRB elections at all eight canneries in Hawai'i.

In early 1947, emboldened by the sugar strike's success, the ILWU had submitted an ambitious set of contract demands to the pineapple consortium's management, including a wage increase, language against production line speed-ups, and improvements to plantation housing. The union also attempted to bargain over race and gender equity, insisting on a ban on discrimination on the grounds of race, religion, or political affiliation and calling for the elimination of the male-female wage differential that gave men 80 cents an hour for fieldwork

¹²⁵ "We, the Women Surveys Membership," *Honolulu Advertiser*, August 8, 1947.

¹²⁶ "We, the Women," *Honolulu Advertiser*, October 27, 1946.

and women only 70 cents for the same work.¹²⁷ Determined to confine the ILWU's agricultural locals to the sugar industry, Hawai'i's political and business leaders refused to negotiate with the workers on the pineapple plantations and in the canneries. They turned to their own wives and trusted female employees to rally communities against the pineapple workers and the ILWU's radical rank-and-file leadership.¹²⁸

On July 12, 1947, a photographer for the *Honolulu Advertiser* captured an image of several women dancing the hula next to another playing the ukulele.¹²⁹ The Asian-American and Native Hawaiian women were not entertaining tourists at a luau, however, but rather shimmying and strumming on their festive picket line outside the Libby, McNeil and Libby cannery, where a teenage McElrath had first trimmed pineapples. During the eight thousand-person industry-wide pineapple strike, photographs of ILWU strikers, Women's Auxiliary members, and community supporters dotted the pages of Hawai'i's newspapers. One image shows a woman striker holding a picket sign stenciled with "Eliminate Discrimination." Another depicts a striker's wife exiting a police wagon after her arrest for blocking a highway during a mass protest. A third captures ILWU labor lawyer Harriet Bouslog arriving at the jailhouse to represent more than two hundred Asian, Asian-American, and Filipino strike arrestees.¹³⁰

¹²⁷ For accounts of the strike, see Matsumoto, *The 1947 Hawaiian Pineapple Strike*; Zalburg, *A Spark is Struck!*, 171-186; Horne, *Fighting in Paradise*, 107-109; Dennis Valdés, *Organized Agriculture and the Labor Movement Before the UFW: Puerto Rico, Hawaii, California* (Austin: University of Texas, 2011), 152.

¹²⁸ "Realtor and Staff Plan Cannery Work," *Honolulu Advertiser*, July 12, 1947.

¹²⁹ "Hula on the picketline," *Honolulu Advertiser*, July 12, 1947.

¹³⁰ "2 Pickets Suffer minor injuries," *Honolulu Advertiser*, July 12, 1947; "116 Oahu Arrests; Mass Picketing Still on," *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, July 14, 1947.

On the strike's second day, Ruth Black and another prominent We, the Women member, Margaret White—each had married one of Hawai'i's wealthiest men—posed with their teenage and adult daughters for a *Honolulu Advertiser* photographer.¹³¹ A month before the strike, Black had publicly announced that President Roosevelt should have added a Fifth Freedom: the right to work and not join a union.¹³² Posing for the camera in a field empty of other people but full of pineapple fronds, the women are shown wearing wide-brimmed hats and laughing, each holding a small machete in one hand and a picked pineapple in the other.¹³³

Black was “setting a well-publicized example to high school students by going to scab in the pineapple fields,” recalled John Reinecke, McElrath's colleague in the Inter-Professional Association.¹³⁴ Later that year, Black fired Reinecke and his wife, Aiko, from their teaching positions in two of Hawai'i's public schools on the grounds that they belonged to the Communist Party. In response, McElrath, Bouslog, and Saiki formed the Hawaii Civil Liberties Committee (HCLC), and led a public campaign in Reineckes' defense.¹³⁵

¹³¹ Henry White, Margaret's husband, presided over Hawaiian Pineapple Company, the world's largest producer of canned pineapple. Ruth's husband, Johnny Black, owned the islands' biggest construction firm EE Black Ltd. Both families participated extensively in the Territory's Republican Party. By the early 1950s, the Hawaiian Pineapple Company was valued at over \$70 million dollars. For more on Henry White, see Robert Bedingfield, “Personality: Pineapples were not enough,” *New York Times*, February 3, 1957; “Ruth Black Dies at 83,” *Honolulu Advertiser*, November 22, 1974.

¹³² Ruth Black, “Letter to the Editor,” *Honolulu Advertiser*, October 26, 1946.

¹³³ “Non-Strikers Work Pine Fields Sunday,” *Honolulu Advertiser*, July 14, 1947. Barbara White age 20, Patricia White age 17, and Jane Black age 24.

¹³⁴ Reinecke, *A Man Must Stand Up!*, 50.

¹³⁵ “Civil Liberties Group Admits Paul Robeson,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, March 24, 1948; “Two HCLC Officers Cited for Contempt of Congress,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, April 15, 1950.

During the pineapple strike, the Honolulu's Business and Professional Women's Organization urged "every able-bodied citizen (housekeeper, teacher, student, bookkeeper) to register as volunteer workers [to] protect our Hawaii Nei from foreign invasion."¹³⁶ We, the Women also encouraged its members to pick up machetes or trimming knives and play their part in breaking the strike. They warned of a "concerted drive by Moscow to create chaos and economic depression in the US by periodic strangulation of business by strikes."¹³⁷ The language of foreign invasion evoked the legacy of immigration from Asia to Hawai'i and Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor during World War II, while weaponizing Cold War anticommunism against the radical politics of the ILWU's officers and rank-and-file leaders.

These rhetorical tactics drew on well-established traditions of anti-radicalism and racism in Hawai'i's industrial relations. Industry bosses, government officials, and rival union leaders had long deployed anticommunism and white supremacy, often through state power, as key weapons against the ILWU and Hawai'i's multiracial working class. For decades, the pineapple industry's management had relied on draconian anti-labor and unlawful assembly laws, such as the Anti-picketing Law and the Riot Act, and police violence to repress labor activism.

Undeterred, the union staged mass demonstrations that blocked public highways to prevent buses of strikebreakers and their police escorts from entering plantations, and to stop truckloads of pineapples from leaving the fields. One strike supporter "attempted to throw herself in front of one of the trucks loaded with picked pineapple," reported the *Honolulu Advertiser*.¹³⁸

¹³⁶ "Business and Professional Women's Organization Statement," *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, July 12, 1947. In Hawai'i Nei is a phrase used to express a sense of shared belonging in Hawaiian island culture.

¹³⁷ Valdés, *Organized Agriculture*, 152.

¹³⁸ "93 Pineapple Pickets Arrested," *Honolulu Advertiser*, July 14, 1947.

Police arrested another woman, Rosario Torres, who had replaced her husband on a highway protest near the California Packing Corporation's Oahu plantation while he was taking a nap. Authorities charged her with unlawful assembly.¹³⁹ Still, the pineapple workers faced formidable challenges, particularly in the anticommunist climate in Hawai'i and across the United States. The police arrested over 200 demonstrators for violating multiple injunctions against picketing and authorities issued criminal charges that could result in exorbitant bail, hefty fines, or lengthy jail sentences. Moreover, anticommunist leaders of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) in Hawai'i threatened to convince the pineapple workers to leave the ILWU and join more conservative AFL unions instead, as did a few former communists who had once been ILWU leaders.

We, the Women, despite its claims of inclusivity, consistently couched its actions in the language of white supremacy and anticommunism. While asserting their own rights to community and political activism, its spokeswomen lobbied the government to support legal maneuvers—such as injunctions against picketing—that impeded workers' ability to strike. Mostly, though, the group's activity stayed within the perceived boundaries of so-called pocketbook domestic issues. In their first community campaign, for example, the members investigated and exposed the high markup on food prices in Hawai'i's shops, blaming it on both unions' wage demands, and the greed of small business owners seeking to increase profit margins.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ "Pineapple Strike Balks TH Bonus," *Honolulu Advertiser*, July 12, 1947.

¹⁴⁰ For more on tensions between consumer and labor politics in this period, see Meg Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics: Economic Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 221-261.

While the ILWU Women’s Auxiliary members and rank-and-file women strikers walked picket lines and marched in protests, the ILWU’s leadership struggled to organize the local community and the seasonal workers—mostly housewives and students—who counted on summer employment in the canneries. The postwar strike wave and an intensifying anticommunism limited the possibilities for cross-class community support for the strike, while the multiracial union’s victory for working-class people led to a white supremacist backlash.

The pineapple strike collapsed after five days, despite the lively picket lines and major demonstrations.¹⁴¹ While the pineapple workers secured a small wage increase, the employers did not move on the demands for housing improvements, equal pay, or a ban on discrimination. It took three more strikes over the next twenty years for women plantation workers to win equal pay in the fields, and for all seasonal workers in the canneries to get access to the same healthcare benefits as year-round employees.¹⁴²

Conclusion

By the summer of 1947, over a decade had passed since McElrath had last felt acidic pineapple juice drip onto her hands while working in the canneries. Since then, she had earned a university degree, joined the Communist Party, begun a promising career in social work, and participated in multiple campaigns to secure union contracts and political rights for Hawai’i’s multiracial working class. The ILWU, particularly the communists among its leaders and rank-and-file activists, had transformed the economic and political landscape on the islands. Industry-

¹⁴¹ Bill, “Into the Marketplace,” 36.

¹⁴² See Valdés, *Organized Agriculture*, 147-168; “Wahine Workers at Libby Cannery Walk-Out in Speedup Protest,” *Honolulu Record*, February 27, 1958; “Foreladies Crack Down at Libby: Speedup Pressure Returns as Canning Season Approaches,” *Honolulu Record*, May 22, 1958.

wide organizing campaigns in sugar and shipping workplaces had built solidarity across race and gender lines, generating wage increases, housing and healthcare improvements, and a multiracial, mostly immigrant, workforce experienced in collective action and political organizing.

While McElrath and other Popular Front women faced arrest and jail time for picketing and blocking highways during mass protests, We, the Women members crossed picket lines to harvest fruit in the fields and trim cores in the canneries. The pineapple strike marked the beginning of a decades-long clash between ILWU women and We, the Women that would both have lasting consequences and provide new opportunities in the lives and careers of McElrath and her Depression-era generation of labor feminists. The next battles would pit grassroots Popular Fronters against We, the Women, skirmishes that played out on Honolulu's streets, and in its schools, courtrooms, and workplaces.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Women must fight for their own liberation”: Claudia Jones’s Journalism and Grassroots Organizing in Transnational Civil Rights and Anti-Colonialism Movements

“By successfully mastering our theory of the woman question, organizing masses of American women and focusing attention primarily on the problems and needs of working class women, our Party can help usher in a new status for American women.”

--Claudia Jones, 1949¹

“There is no fundamental difference between the policies of the Tories, Labour, or Liberal Parties, as all of them stand for the continuation of the oppression of peoples of Asia, Africa, Latin America...The only party which has consistently stood against racialism is the Communist Party.”

---Claudia Jones, 1964²

In February 1949, Claudia Jones, the National Secretary of the Communist Party’s Women’s Commission, was out on bail after her own arrest the previous year, but still under the threat of deportation for her Popular Front politics and grassroots organizing. That winter, she and other members of the Congress of American Women (CAW), including its president, Gene Weltfish, were in the midst of a “Women Fight Back” campaign against anticommunism. Decrying the federal government’s arrests of the Communist Party (CPUSA) national leadership for allegedly violating the Alien Registration Act of 1940, CAW members organized rallies and delegations to political officials in cities across the country to protest race and gender

¹ Claudia Jones, “We Seek Full Equality for Women,” *Daily Worker*, September 4, 1949.

² Claudia Jones, “Editorial, Elections, and Racial Hypocrisy,” *West Indian Gazette* (October 1964).

discrimination in jury selections, while also planning public events in support of the dozens of communists on trial or called to testify at government hearings.³

In New York City on February 15, during the infamous trial of eleven members of the CPUSA's National Committee—including Jones's close friends, Ben Davis and Henry Winston—Jones, Weltfish, and several other CAW members formed a delegation to the presiding federal judge, Harold Medina, in his chambers.⁴ The multiracial group demanded that the grand jury's indictments be voided on the grounds that the New York's jury system discriminated against women, workers, and non-white people. As Jones wrote in a defense of Davis, the communists' lawyers had also called on the judge to throw out the indictments because the grand jury selection system “discriminates against the poor and members of minority groups, including Jews and Negroes, in favor of the rich.”⁵ Claiming that the state's jury qualification system favored wealthy white men, the CAW's delegation informed Judge Medina that women made up just 13 percent of New York's grand jury list and 17 percent of the trial

³ For more on this campaign and CAW's history, see Weigand, *Red Feminism*, 46-66; Swerdlow, “The Congress of American Women,” 296-312; Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads*, 59; McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*, 155; Higashida, *Black Internationalist Feminism*, 42; de Haan, “Eugénie Cotton, Pak Chong-ae, and Claudia Jones,” 174-189.

⁴ “Congress of American Women Delegation on Behalf on Communist Cases,” *Daily Worker*, February 20, 1949; Committee on Un-American Activities, U.S. House of Representatives, *Report on Congress of American Women*, (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1949), 61. The eleven CPUSA members on trial in New York were: Ben Davis, Eugene Dennis, John Gates, Gil Green, Gus Hall, Irving Potash, Jack Stachel, Robert Thompson, John Williamsons, Henry Winston, and Carl Winter.

⁵ Jones, *Ben Davis: Fighter for Freedom*, 127.

jury list. He responded without irony, “These figures demonstrate that far from discriminating against women, they are selected in large numbers.”⁶

This delegation is just one example of how, throughout the early 1950s, Jones and other Popular Fronters continued to use every opportunity to mobilize for women’s rights, racial justice, and socialist politics, even during the Second Red Scare and the Cold War’s early years. Jones found multiple ways to illustrate that the anticommunist attacks on her and other CPUSA national leaders were based in white supremacy, sexism, and discrimination against the foreign-born, and designed to destroy a growing multiracial, cross-class movement for civil liberties and women’s rights. These renewed attacks on free speech and civil rights activism shaped the decade’s social movements and helped direct liberalism’s ascendancy. Liberals in the Truman administration had to balance their support for civil rights legislation with their anticommunist repression of labor and leftist leaders, particularly immigrants and people of color, as part of their efforts to appease Southern politicians and white supremacists.

From her first days as a grassroots organizer for the Young Communist League and participant in Popular Front coalitions to the last years of her life during which she travelled to the Soviet Union, Japan, and China at the invitation of peace and women’s organizations, Jones held a Popular Front-influenced worldview. She held national offices in the communist movement throughout her career in America, and, even after she moved to England in 1955, she maintained that the Communist Party was the only political party to make racial justice central to its theories and campaigns. While she never hesitated to criticize the Party, producing policy

⁶ “Negro Names on Jury List in New York,” *Baltimore Sun*, February 16, 1949; “N.Y. Discrimination on Juries Denied,” *Washington Post*, February 16, 1949; “Counsel for Reds Told Jury ‘Bias’ Case not Proved,” *The Daily Journal*, February 16, 1949. Newspapers reported that only 273 women out of 2,125 were on the Grand Jury list, and 1,874 women out of 10,742 on the trial jury list.

papers and newspaper editorials—in the U.S. and the U.K.—that called on it to prioritize Black women’s needs and leadership, she also held firm to her lifelong Popular Front beliefs.

Consistently claiming an American identity based in Black struggles for freedom, she also considered herself part of an international socialist movement centered on self-determination and anti-colonialism.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Jones advocated for the expansion of democracy and citizenship rights for women and non-white people all over the world. Her Popular Front politics remained her guiding principles, whether she was fighting (personally and politically) against the policing and criminalization of dissent in the U.S. or building a new life and discovering new priorities in England. Despite the revelations of Stalin’s crimes in 1956 and the Soviet Union’s invasion of Hungary that same year—which led many radicals to leave the Party, including her good friend Stretch Johnson—and notwithstanding her own disappointments in the Communist Party of Great Britain’s domestic policies, she stayed committed to the theories that had formed her political vision since the mid-1930s. “It was Jones’s loyalty and commitment to communist principles,” writes Alrick X. Cambridge, who worked with Jones in London and later became an important activist and editor in British anti-racist movements, “that were her deep ethical compass, and the source of her moral authority.”⁷

The first half of this chapter examines Jones’s career as a journalist and organizer during the ten years between her first arrest in 1948 and her launch of the *West Indian Gazette*, one of her most important contributions to radical politics, in 1958, three years after her forced exile to Britain. Jones became a political target in the U.S. and the U.K. for her effective organizing and

⁷ Alrick X. Cambridge, “When Socialist Values Harmonize with Human Desire for Liberation: Assessing Claudia Jones’s Politics,” in *Claudia Jones: Beyond Containment*, 210.

popular political writings and speeches on civil, labor, and women's rights. Examining her experiences with the state's attempts to stifle free speech and campaigns for racial, gender, and economic justice, the chapter illustrates how anticommunism abetted white supremacy's and nativism's significant influence on national politics, undermining demands for democratic rights and anti-racist legislation. It also illustrates Jones's continued efforts to tell the history of Black women's political, social, and economic contributions to national narratives, particularly in America and Britain, and details her theories on race, gender, and class oppression.

Yet Jones's courtroom battles over civil rights and free speech also provided opportunities for women-led multiracial organizations to publicize and mobilize against gender, race, and class discrimination in the criminal justice system. The CAW's "Women Fight Back" campaign is but one example of the important role international women's organizations and Black feminists played in the postwar period.⁸ Tracing Jones's status as an "immigrant" and a "citizen" in the U.S. and U.K. respectively illustrates the ways that race, gender, and class have informed understandings of national belonging. It underscores her reasons—in theory and practice—for always demanding full citizenship rights for Black women as the prerequisite for freedom from oppression for all.

The second half of the chapter explores the legacy of Jones's earlier Popular Front political education and career experiences in the U.K.'s anti-colonial movements and protests against racism. In both America and Great Britain, Jones helped build a women-led, cross-class multiracial movement that pushed for anti-racist legislation and sponsored mass demonstrations to combat racism and sexism. This part of the chapter analyzes one of Jones's most important

⁸ For discussions of Jones as part of a Black left feminist movement in the 1940s and 1950s, see McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*, 166-173; Weigand, *Red Feminism*, 97-113; Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx*, 29-68; Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads*, 68-72.

contributions to Black radical politics, the *West Indian Gazette* (more commonly known as *WIG*), a monthly newspaper that ran from 1958 to 1965, its last issue appearing a few months after her death on Christmas Eve, 1964. Through the newspaper and the events it sponsored that engaged her network of old and new allies, she protested police brutality and anti-Black violence in the U.S. and the U.K., and reported on African and Caribbean movements for independence and self-determination.

In a recreation of her earlier Popular Front multiracial coalition-building, she founded or joined a number of organizations, including the Inter-Racial Friendship Coordinating Committee and the Movement for Colonial Freedom, that mobilized against racist laws and demanded the passage of anti-discrimination legislation. Throughout her career, Jones asserted her place in multiracial democracies and right to full citizenship, amplified voices from multiracial, cross-class, and (often) women-led organizations, and lived by the principle that mass movements—built through grassroots organizing—were the only mechanisms that could enforce democratic reforms and achieve the promise of self-determination.

The Making of a Political Prisoner

Although Jones had entered the U.S. as a legal immigrant when she was a child, she lived most of her adult life under threat of imprisonment and deportation for her political beliefs and organizing efforts.⁹ After the eruption of the Korean War, a barrage of federal legislation in the 1950s steadily eroded citizens' and non-citizens' rights to free speech and political expression, even as the Truman administration issued executive orders to desegregate the armed forces and

⁹ As Carole Boyce Davies has argued, “incarceration and deportation are the twin ways that the United States has dealt with its ‘undesirables.’” Boyce Davies, “Deportable Subjects,” 955.

federal employment (in a limited attempt to expand civil rights protections for Black citizens), and tried to prevent Congress from passing more anticommunist federal legislation.¹⁰ As white supremacists and anticommunists solidified their alliances in the late 1940s and early 1950s through attacks on radical, labor, and civil rights leaders and organizations, Popular Fronters continued to mobilize around feminist and anti-racist issues. In courtroom testimony, public speeches, published essays, and *Daily Worker* articles, Jones explicitly connected the government's anticommunist legislation and actions to white supremacy and anti-immigrant xenophobia.

From 1948 to 1955, between arrests, hearings, detentions, and imprisonment, Jones continued to work as a communist journalist, theorist, and organizer. For the *Daily Worker*, she wrote a bi-weekly column on women's issues called "Half-the-World," and regularly reported on the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) hearings and courtroom trials.¹¹ In addition to giving speeches at national conferences of the CPUSA, CAW, and kindred organizations, she taught classes and participated in events at the Jefferson School for Social Science, the Institute of Marxism, and other communist-affiliated workers' schools and training centers. At these schools, she imparted a militant anti-racist and feminist politics that emphasized Black women's roles in labor and other social movements throughout American history, lessons

¹⁰ See, for example, the Internal Security Act of 1950, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952, and the Communist Control Act of 1954. For more on these Acts, see Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes*, 141, 293, 357; Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx*, 134-159.

¹¹ See, for example, Jones, "We Seek Full Equality for Women," *Daily Worker*, September 1, 1949; Claudia Jones, "Un-American Committee and the Negro People," *Daily Worker*, August 1, 1949 and August 3, 1949. For analysis of Jones's journalism, see Cristina Mislán, "Claudia Jones Speaks to 'half the world': Gendering Cold War Politics in the *Daily Worker*, 1950–1953," *Feminist Media Studies* 17:2 (March 2017), 281-296; Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx*, 77-83; Higashida, *Black Internationalist Feminism*, 47.

she had learned as a YCL member.¹² She published essays in *Political Affairs*, one of the CPUSA's leading theoretical journals, including "An End to the Neglect of the Problems of Negro Women," in which she expounded on her understanding of Black women's triple oppression.¹³ By 1955, Jones's arrests and imprisonment for publicly speaking out against racism, sexism, anti-colonialism, and economic inequality had become an international cause célèbre.

Years earlier, in January 1948, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) had arrested and detained Jones under both the Immigration Act of 1918, which allowed the government to deport any 'alien' who was a member of the "anarchistic or similar classes" even if they were legal U.S. residents, and the Alien Registration Act of 1940, which made it a crime to teach or advocate the overthrow of the United States government.¹⁴ Released from detention on Ellis Island but still under threat of deportation, she embarked on a defense campaign alongside other radicals and supporters to publicize her arrest and pressure the government to drop the deportation order.

The CPUSA, CAW, and the American Committee for the Protection of the Foreign Born, for example, planned a series of local "Free Claudia Jones" events. "This is Claudia Jones's

¹² Gettleman, "No Varsity Teams," 349.

¹³ See, for example, Jones, "An End to the Neglect of the Problems of Negro Women," *Political Affairs* 28.6 (June 1949), 51-67; Jones, "International Women's Day and the Struggle for Peace," *Political Affairs* (March 1950). Boyce Davies describes Jones as a major theoretician for the CPUSA, but also points to her writings that challenged the Party's political positions. Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx*, 30.

¹⁴ While the Immigration Act of 1918, also known as the Alien Anarchists Exclusion Act, does not mention communists specifically, it was enacted to "exclude and expel from the United States aliens who are members of the anarchistic and similar classes." *Annals of Congress*, 65th Congress, 2nd Session, 1012; Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes*, 58.

country, she knows no other,” stated fellow communist and future cellmate Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. “Here she grew up, here she went to school; here she engaged in workers’ struggles, in the student movement.”¹⁵ That February, undeterred by recent anti-labor legislation that curtailed the right to peacefully protest, such as the Labor Management Act of 1947, Jones, Stretch Johnson, and Councilman Ben Davis joined the multiracial picket lines that had formed outside the INS headquarters in New York City as a protest over her arrest.¹⁶

Simultaneous to the government’s arrests of communists nationwide, President Truman’s Attorney General Tom Clark, an anticommunist liberal New Dealer, oversaw a campaign that targeted non-citizen and non-white labor leaders and civil rights activists.¹⁷ FBI surveillance and Clark’s Federal Employee Loyalty Program would soon decimate the Popular Front organizations that Jones had helped build over the last decade.¹⁸

The government’s arrest of Black and foreign-born communists, however, also provided Jones and other radical women opportunities to publicize discrimination in the criminal justice system and attacks on civil liberties. While their attention increasingly turned to the practical matter of keeping Jones and other immigrant radicals out of jail and in the country, women radicals and progressives also used these arrests to highlight white supremacy and inequality in federal legislation and the courts.

¹⁵ Johnson, *I Think of My Mother*, 24.

¹⁶ Art Shields, “Justice Dep’t Refuses to See Deportation Protest Marchers,” *Daily Worker*, February 3, 1948.

¹⁷ Clark targeted CIO leaders and communists born in Europe, Australia, Mexico, and the Caribbean. For a list of deportees and their countries of origin, see “CIO Opens Battle to Admit Official,” *New York Times*, January 22, 1948.

¹⁸ Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes*, 209-211.

Out on bail in 1948, Jones embarked on a nationwide speaking tour, supported with monies that the Claudia Jones Defense Fund had raised. Over the next six months, she spoke about women's equality and police brutality at rallies and on college campuses in forty-three states. From New Haven and Boston on the East Coast, to Seattle and Los Angeles on the West Coast, to Phoenix and other cities in between, thousands of people turned out to hear her speak about voting rights, police brutality, and free speech.¹⁹ At each stop, she attempted to recruit women to the Communist Party and set up local women's commissions. The Party's National Women's Commission, which she and Flynn headed, had begun to encourage women in local branches of both the CP and YCL branches to attend special courses for women's leadership training.²⁰

Jones continued to hone her theories on race and gender oppression in conversation with other radical women involved in Popular Front-style organizations, including the CAW. The CAW's leadership espoused left-feminist theories on women's oppression that both acknowledged how race and class differences affected women's daily lives, but also called for gender solidarity in grassroots organizing to achieve women's rights and liberation.²¹ By 1948, the CAW could count over 250,000 members in over twenty cities. Many local chapters focused on grassroots campaigns to address rising costs of food, housing, and childcare. The Detroit local ran a successful boycott to protest an increase in the city's meat prices, while the Chicago

¹⁹ FBI, Claudia Jones, File Number 100-72390; "Thousands Hear Claudia Jones in Phoenix," *Daily Worker*, May 26, 1948; Arnold Sroog, "Out on Bail, She Signs 57 New CP Members," *Daily Worker*, June 4, 1948.

²⁰ Weigand, *Red Feminism*, 74; Higashida, *Black Internationalist Feminism*, 47.

²¹ Weigand, *Red Feminism*, 47; de Haan, "Eugénie Cotton, Pak Chong-ae, and Claudia Jones, 183.

chapter raised funds for an interracial nursery school and held a movie series on the history and needs of women.²² Other local efforts concentrated on wider issues of free speech and political freedoms. New York's CAW branch played a major role in defending Jones, Flynn, and other communist women from the government's intensifying anticommunist attacks. What all the branches had in common was a call for women's liberation and a willingness to take direct action to win their causes.

At a "Women's Rally" in February 1948, speakers connected Jones's arrest to other Black women's prominent struggles to desegregate the nation's universities and secure justice in its courtrooms. They accused the government of targeting Jones to send a warning message to all Black women activists.²³ The CAW's leadership agreed, and began to plan the "Women Fight Back" campaign in support of the many indicted or subpoenaed leaders of labor unions, Popular Front organizations, and the CPUSA.

In September 1948, Jones returned from her speaking tour across America to New York City for her deportation hearing. Although she appeared at the INS offices, she and her lawyer refused to take part in the proceedings on the grounds that they were illegal, and that she had broken no laws that could lead to her legal expulsion from the United States.²⁴ As a key figure in the courtroom battles over civil rights and a target of anticommunist attacks on Black and

²² Rebecca Stiles Taylor, "Interesting News of the Congress of American Women," *Chicago Defender*, July 30, 1949; Swerdlow, "The Congress of American Women."

²³ In 1948, other famous cases that involved Black women fighting for their rights included: Ada Fisher's fight for a place at the University of Oklahoma's Law School and Rosa Lee Ingram's death penalty case. See, "Rally of Women Assails Threat of Deportations," *Daily Worker*, February 10, 1948; "Negro Women Assail Claudia Jones Arrest," *Daily Worker*, February 19, 1948.

²⁴ "Witness Missing, Alien Case Halts," *New York Times*, September 14, 1948.

immigrant activists, Jones continued to rail publicly against the government's arrests of radical leftists while it ignored or exonerated the perpetrators of racial violence. "Not a hearing has been scheduled to question the loyalty of the KKK white supremacist mobs who do violence to the Constitution and the Bill of Rights," she wrote in the *Daily Worker* in 1949.²⁵

Yet she was no Soviet apologist out to serve Moscow by embarrassing the U.S. government. Her dissent extended to her fellow communists, labor organizers, and progressives; specifically she called on the CPUSA as well as the U.S. government and the American labor movement to realign priorities toward the needs of Black women. Throughout the summer of 1949, she amplified the voices of women she had met on her speaker's tour, in the CPUSA women's groups, and during the CAW mobilizations. Jones and other women in the CPUSA leadership supported a full agenda for women's economic, political, and social needs: including, federal and state resources for childcare; equal pay for equal work; and a 40 hour work week because, as Elizabeth Gurley Flynn wrote in 1947, "women workers have double duty of job and care of home." Like Jones, Flynn called for an increase of "capable women, Negro and white" elected or appointed as government and labor union officials.²⁶ Jones, too, persisted in demanding recognition of patriarchy as an obstacle to freedom, writing a *Daily Worker* article under the title, "We Seek Full Equality for Women."²⁷

²⁵ Claudia Jones, "Un-American Committee and the Negro People," *Daily Worker*, August 1, 1949 and August 3, 1949.

²⁶ Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *Woman's Place: In the Fight for a Better World* (New York: New Century Publishers, 1947).

²⁷ Jones, "An End to the Neglect of the Problems of Negro Women;" Claudia Jones, "We Seek Full Equality for Women," *Daily Worker*, September 4, 1949.

During the summer of 1949, Jones published an essay—chock full as always of labor statistics, cultural analysis, historical research, and calls to action—that influenced the CPUSA’s theories on what she termed the “super exploitation” of Black women.²⁸ In “An End to the Neglect of the Problems of Negro Women,” she uses her deep knowledge of Black, women’s, economic, and labor history to analyze Black women’s daily lives under American capitalism’s development, their past militancy in social justice movements and organizations, and the necessity of their leadership in contemporary multiracial, labor-community coalitions that could build working-class political power. White supremacy (and its attendant anti-radicalism) *and* Black women’s labor (as workers, mothers, and organizers) shaped American politics and society, she asserts.

In a series of examples taken from U.S. labor structures and labor history, she illustrates how most Black women occupied the lowest paying, least protected jobs in the nation. “The super exploitation of the Negro woman worker is thus revealed not only in that she receives, as a woman, less than equal pay for equal work with men,” she writes, “but also in that the majority of Negro women get less than half the pay of white women.”²⁹ In the post-emancipation decades, race, gender, and class discrimination continued to shunt Black women into domestic and agricultural labor. More recent gains they had achieved through New Deal legislation and access to industrial jobs during World War II had quickly dissipated, in part because the mainstream labor movement’s national leadership continued to overlook or actively shun them.

²⁸ For analyses of “An End to the Neglect of the Problems of Negro Women,” see Balthaser, *Anti-Imperialist Modernism*, 17; Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx*, 37-39, 47-49; Higashida, *Black Internationalist Feminism*, 46-47; McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*, 166-173; Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads*, 70-72. These scholars identify Jones’s work as a precursor to black feminist theory in the 1970s, and as one of the earliest statements of “intersectionality.”

²⁹ Jones, “An End to the Neglect of the Problems of Negro Women,” 76.

Jones criticized unions in the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) for not investing more in campaigns to organize Black women, but she also pointed to some exceptions of women-led organizing drives that had improved workers' lives and resulted in local electoral successes. "It is merely lip-service for progressive unionists to speak of organizing the unorganized," she states, "without turning their eyes to the serious plight of the domestic worker, who, unprotected by union standards, is also the victim of exclusion from all social and labor legislation."³⁰ An early advocate for the Domestic Workers Union (the subject of her first article in the *Daily Worker* in 1936), she calls on the labor movement to respect Black women's leadership experience in strikes and mass actions, and to invest in efforts to extend the right to organize under New Deal's National Labor Relations Act to domestic work and other excluded categories. "The struggle of the tobacco workers led by Negro women," she recounts, "later merged with the political action of Negroes and whites which led to the election of the first Negro in the South (in Winston-Salem, NC) since Reconstruction."³¹ The labor and progressive political movements, she proposed, should look to multiracial grassroots labor and political organizing for inspiration.

By 1950, the CAW—like the CPUSA and Workers Alliance—had fallen victim to the government's anticommunist surveillance and harassment. The re-emergence of Popular Front politics faced the same attacks. HUAC investigated the group's leaders and members, and the U.S. Attorney General required CAW officers and members to register with the government under the Foreign Agents Registration Act. Rather than comply, the CAW's leadership first

³⁰ Jones, "An End to the Neglect of the Problems of Negro Women," 79.

³¹ Jones, "An End to the Neglect of the Problems of Negro Women," 78. See also, Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism*.

officially separated the group from the international socialist Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) and then voted to disband rather than mount an expensive legal challenge to the registration law.³²

In February 1950, almost two years after Jones's original arrest, the INS signed a new order for her immediate deportation to Trinidad. She appealed the decision, and again her allies set up a regular picket line in front of the INS offices.³³ A local INS inspector oversaw the appeals hearing, a proceeding that Elizabeth Gurley Flynn called, "a blow directed against the whole Negro people, against Negro women in particular and against West Indian Negroes," adding "it is designed to throw a scare into the more than 100,000 West Indians who live in Harlem now."³⁴ Well-known in Harlem for her advocacy of civil liberties for the past decade, Jones garnered local and national support for her legal claim and her desire to stay in the United States. A few days after her hearing, she received a temporary reprieve from an unlikely source: the United States Supreme Court, which ruled that INS inspectors could not preside over deportation hearings. Therefore, her deportation case had to be retried under a presiding judge.³⁵

The reprieve did not last long. That winter, the INS issued another deportation order for Jones. It now had the backing of the Internal Security Act, which had become law in September 1950 (with Congress overriding President Truman's veto), and which further criminalized her

³² Weigand, *Red Feminism*, 63; Swerdlow, "The Congress of American Women," 311; de Haan, "Eugénie Cotton, Pak Chong-ae, and Claudia Jones: Rethinking Transnational Feminism and International Politics."

³³ "Pickets to Protest Move to Deport Claudia Jones," *Daily Worker*, February 14, 1950.

³⁴ "Crockett Joins Counsel for Claudia Jones," *Daily Worker*, February 17, 1950.

³⁵ "Deportation Hearings Suspended; Communists Gain by Court Ruling," *New York Times*, February 22, 1950.

political opinions, and her public opposition to the U.S. involvement in the Korean War. The Act required that communists and other “subversives” register with a newly created Subversive Activities Control Board, which could issue fines to any individual communist or communist organization’s leadership that failed to register.³⁶ The legislation allowed the government to deport any non-citizens and deny passports to any citizens whom the government deemed subversive.

A decade earlier, Jones, as an “alien,” had dutifully submitted to the government the required affidavit declaring that she belonged to the YCL, and that declaration now became the evidence to charge her under the Internal Security Act, even though it had not been illegal to belong to the YCL at the time. Many communists refused to register under the Internal Security Act, because as Harvard-educated lawyer and imprisoned communist Ben Davis later wrote, “they get you going and coming.”³⁷

Detained again in late November 1950, Jones returned to Ellis Island and entered what came to be known as the McCarran Wing, named for the anticommunist Senator Pat McCarran, primary author of the Internal Security Act. She resided there along with seventeen other detained communists who, she wrote, had a “a virtual United Nations composition.”³⁸ While she

³⁶ Annals of Congress, 81st Congress, 2nd Session, 987. The purpose of the Act was to “protect the United States against certain un-American and subversive activities by requiring registration of Communist organizations, and other purposes.” Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx*, 134; Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes*, 140.

³⁷ Ben Davis, *Ben Davis on the McCarran Act at the Harvard Law Forum*, (New York: The Gus-Hall-Benjamin J. Davis Defense Committee, 1962), 13.

³⁸ Claudia Jones, “Writes from Ellis Island,” *Daily Worker*, November 8, 1950. Thirteen communists in this group became known as the “Foley Square” defendants (named for the location of the courthouse in New York City): Jones, Alexander Bittelman, George Blake Charney, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Betty Gannett, V. J. Jerome, Arnold Johnson, Albert F. Lannon, Jacob Mindel, Pettis Perry, Alexander Trachtenberg, Louis Weinstock, William

acknowledged her comrades' many different birthplaces, she made clear their collective claim on an American national identity. "We are Americans—each and everyone of us, similarly persecuted—not by accident of birth," she wrote in the *Daily Worker*, "but by choice."³⁹ She left a few days later, released on bail. Just before Christmas, however, the INS issued a third deportation order.⁴⁰ Again she appealed.

For more than six years, from her first arrest in early 1948 to her sentencing in late 1954, Jones experienced constant surveillance and state repression, always at the risk of the police or INS officials arriving at her door to take her back to Ellis Island or the Women's House of Detention in New York City. Yet, between her deportation hearings and incarcerations, Jones continued to speak out against white supremacy and anticommunism. Throughout the early 1950s, she expressed her critiques of U.S. foreign policy and the military-industrial complex in her essays and articles published in the communist press and in speeches she gave across the country. As always, she claimed that women would lead the movements and organizations demanding peace in the postwar period, and often reported on women's roles and organizing efforts in previous social justice movements—including abolition, suffrage, and workers' rights struggles—providing bibliographies of these histories to her readers and audiences.⁴¹

Weinstone. The majority of these defendants were born outside the United States, and two were Black. For decades, the U.S. government targeted immigrant and non-white labor and political activists.

³⁹ Claudia Jones, "Writes from Ellis Island," *Daily Worker*, November 8, 1950.

⁴⁰ "Ouster Ordered of Claudia Jones," *New York Times*, December 22, 1950.

⁴¹ For a selection of Jones's writings on women, foreign policy, and the peace movement, see Jones, "International Women's Day and the Struggle for Peace," 32-45; Jones, "For the Unity of Women in the Cause of Peace," *Political Affairs* 30, no.2 (February 1951): 151-168; "Women's Organizations in the Struggle for Peace," *Daily Worker* (February 13, 1951): 7-8; "The Struggle for Peace in the United States," *Political Affairs* 31, no. 2 (February 1952): 1-20.

When government agents arrested her again in June 1951, Jones reunited with her fellow “virtual United Nations” Ellis Island detainees in New York. She spent the next year and a half out on bail and protesting the arrests. After a nine-month trial that began in January 1953, the jury—which as she pointed out included only “one lone Negro” as an alternate—convicted her and the other defendants.⁴² The presiding judge sentenced her to a year and one day’s imprisonment, and levied a \$2,000 fine.⁴³ In her statement to the court, Jones invoked words from Frederick Douglass, the Bible, and Karl Marx to protest the jury’s decision. Her conviction, she claimed, showed not the state’s or the prosecutors’ strength, but their “desperate fear of the people.”⁴⁴ Drawing attention to the jury’s racial, gender, and class make-up, she stated that the “virtual exclusion of Negroes, Puerto Rican and manual workers...exists not because of lack of qualifications or even financial hardship, but because of deliberate discrimination based on consciously cultivated white supremacist ruling class prejudice.”⁴⁵ The defendants appealed all the way to the Supreme Court, which refused to hear their case. For the next two years, she fought the legality of her conviction and prison sentence. She lost.

On January 24, 1955, Jones, Flynn, and two federal marshals boarded a Pullman train in New York headed for West Virginia. Unlike her southward trip with Stretch Johnson to attend the SNYC meeting in 1942, this journey would not end with YCL comrades meeting her at the

⁴² Claudia Jones, “Statement Before Being Sentenced to One Year and a Day Imprisonment,” reprinted in *Claudia Jones: Beyond Containment*, 8.

⁴³ The defendants had differing experiences: two were acquitted (Simon Gerson and Isidore Begun), two released for health reasons (Israel Amter and Marion Bachrach), and the others received longer sentences than Jones. See *Thirteen Communists Speak to the Court*, (New York: New Century Publishers, 1953).

⁴⁴ Jones, “Statement Before Being Sentenced,” 8.

⁴⁵ Jones, “Statement Before Being Sentenced,” 8.

station. Jones was now Inmate No. 11,712-W, and the train was heading to the Federal Reformatory for Women in Alderson, West Virginia, a Jim Crow prison in a Jim Crow town. Upon arrival, the Alderson guards assigned the two women to separate housing, sending Flynn to the whites-only cottage-cells.⁴⁶ Almost immediately, Jones's heart condition led to her hospitalization in the prison infirmary. Facing life-threatening conditions, she offered to leave the United States voluntarily if she were granted an early release.⁴⁷ The Federal Parole Board denied her request.

In response, her allies organized a worldwide letter campaign for her parole on humanitarian grounds. The radical social worker Bertha Reynolds urged the government “not to make imprisonment an act of vengeance,” but instead to “carry out the requirements of the law in a just and humane manner.”⁴⁸ The Parole Board received letters and postcards from labor unions, student groups, and radical organizations across the globe. “I am a member of a large union—most of the members are women—we often talk about Miss Claudia Jones,” wrote one woman, “It seems to me that it would be quite inhumane to keep her incarcerated.”⁴⁹ The government refused to grant her parole, but it did capitulate to her health needs and mandated that Alderson provide her a salt-free diet. Luckily for Jones and Flynn, this required that she be assigned to a cell-room in Flynn's cottage, despite the prison's official rules about racial segregation.

⁴⁶ For accounts of Jones's imprisonment and campaigns for her release, see Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *The Alderson Story: My Life as a Political Prisoner* (New York: International Publishers, 1972), 43-98; Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx*, 107-109; Johnson, *I Think of My Mother*, 35-45.

⁴⁷ “Claudia Jones will Leave Country if U.S. Lets Her,” *Atlanta Daily World*, February 11, 1955.

⁴⁸ Bertha Reynolds to Federal Parole Board, April 29, 1955, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Claudia Jones, File Number: 100-11459.

⁴⁹ Esther Carroll to Federal Parole Board, May 10, 1955, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Claudia Jones, File Number: 100-11459.

As during her time in the Sea View sanitarium, Jones found ways to read and create during her incarceration. In the evenings, she wrote poetry and discussed the news of the day with Flynn in their maximum-security cottage, and during the long days, she learned ceramics, woodworking, jewelry making, and weaving in Alderson's craft workshops. She also, of course, organized other women into collective purposes: helping them apply for parole, planning and then winning a prize for a group theatrical performance of a play about Davy Crockett at a July 4th celebration, and leading discussions with white and Black inmates on manifestations of racism and anti-racism within the prison's confines, not just with the inmates, but among the guards as well.⁵⁰

After spending another three weeks in Alderson's infirmary in the fall of 1955, Jones was finally released on October 23, having served nine months and eighteen days of her sentence. Flynn's cottage-cell window gave her a view onto the roadway outside, and she watched Jones leave. "She turned to wave—tall, slender, beautiful, dressed in golden brown, and then she was gone," Flynn remembered, "This was the hardest day I spent in prison."⁵¹ Flynn herself served another year in Alderson.

On December 9, 1955, after few weeks of recuperating in a New York hospital, Jones boarded the *Queen Elizabeth* cruise liner bound for the United Kingdom. Hundreds of her friends and comrades, including Stretch and Martha Johnson and Paul and Essie Robeson, attended a farewell reception in her honor the previous evening. "She will contribute greatly," Paul Robeson predicted, "to that movement which has emerged so powerfully in our time, the colonial

⁵⁰ Flynn, *The Alderson Story*, 77; Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx*, 110-117; Donna Langston, "The Legacy of Claudia Jones," *Nature, Society and Thought* 2, no. 1 (1989), 85.

⁵¹ Flynn, *The Alderson Story*, 115.

liberation struggles which are helping to re-make the world before our eyes.”⁵² It was a prescient comment. The anticommunist backlash could kick her out of the country. But it could not erase the legacy of her Popular Front activism on the democratic movements to come.

An American Popular Fronter in London

When Jones, just shy of forty years old, arrived in London after her forcible exile from America, her home since she was a child, she was almost penniless and in ill-health from a heart condition made worse by her recent incarceration. Immigration laws in the U.S. and the U.K. would continue to impinge on her freedom of movement and her rights. Under the British Nationality Act of 1948, Jones’s Trinidadian birth had given her rights to British citizenship based on her status as a British colonial subject, the term used for populations in the Commonwealth and British colonies. As she would discover, however, her British citizenship would not protect her from racial violence and discrimination in the U.K. any more than U.S. citizenship protected the rights of Black Americans during her thirty years there.

American immigration legislation would continue to have consequences for Jones, even after she began her new life in exile. The U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 had introduced stricter limits on the numbers of new Caribbean immigrants to America, which, in part, contributed to the increase in West Indian migration to Britain. After 1952, although West Indians continued to be British citizens, the U.S. government no longer included them under British quotas, instead permitting entry to only one hundred immigrants from all the Caribbean islands combined. In an essay published in 1964, Jones asserted that British and American

⁵² Paul Robeson Statement, Box 1, File 2, Claudia Jones Memorial Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, New York, NY.

imperialism had created the economic conditions for increased migration from the West Indies, while immigration laws in both countries had limited the legal freedom of movement for Black migrants, even those with citizenship rights.⁵³ As a result of the American Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952, she wrote, West Indians have abandoned plans to migrate to the U.S. and instead “have trekked in thousands to Britain, where they are confronted with an extension of their problems as colonials in a metropolitan country in the form of color prejudice, joblessness, housing shortages, etc.”⁵⁴ Immigration laws (based in the ideology of white supremacy and in opposition to multiracial democracy) and the British postwar economic boom that partially relied on the labor of people of color in healthcare and other industries created a new migration pattern.

In the two decades that followed the British Nationality Act of 1948, almost half a million people, often recruited for the lowest paid jobs in healthcare and transportation in Britain’s cities, moved from the Caribbean to Britain. The Nationality Act created a specific British national citizenship status for people born or naturalized in the United Kingdom and its colonies, replacing the broader definition of British subject used to cover Commonwealth residents. The British government created even tighter controls over freedom of movement for British citizens from its colonies or former colonies when Parliament passed the Commonwealth

⁵³ Claudia Jones, “The Caribbean Community in Britain,” *Freedomways* (Summer 1964), 340-357, reprinted in *Claudia Jones: Beyond Containment*, 165-181.

⁵⁴ Jones, “The Caribbean Community in Britain,” 170.

Immigration Act of 1962. Jones asserted that this Act, which she referred to as a “colour-bar” law, created a second-class citizenship for her and other Black Britons.⁵⁵

Like thousands of others born in the West Indies who found their way to London and other cities in the U.K., Jones was an “immigrant” in the eyes of many white British citizens, never to belong to the British nation despite her birthright, first as a British colonial subject and then as a British citizen after the passage of the Nationality Act. She spent the better part of the last years of her life in a movement that opposed racist immigration legislation and colonialism.

As when she had immigrated to Harlem thirty years earlier, Jones joined a West Indian community on the rise in London’s Brixton neighborhood. By the time of her arrival in London, two thirds of British citizens (or subjects before 1948) who had left their home countries for the U.K. came from the Caribbean, an increase partially resulting from restricted immigration to America. They came to be known as the Windrush generation, named for the *Empire Windrush* ship that carried families from Jamaica, Trinidad, and other Caribbean islands in 1948. From 1954 to 1955, the number of Caribbean-born British citizens relocating to the U.K. more than doubled.⁵⁶

In an echo of her parents’ experience, Jones had to build a new life with few financial resources in a city whose landlords and employers discriminated against Black newcomers,

⁵⁵ Claudia Jones, “Butler’s Colour-Bar Mocks Commonwealth,” *West Indian Gazette* 4, no. 11 (November 1961). For more on the history of the Commonwealth Immigration Act of 1962, see Perry, *London is the Place for Me*; Jones, “The Caribbean Community in Britain,” 171-174.

⁵⁶ Perry, *London is the Place for Me*, 160; Edward Pilkington, *Beyond the Mother County: West Indians and the Notting Hill White Riots* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 1988). Jones claimed that the number of West Indians in Brixton, her own neighborhood, grew from 85,000 in 1955 to 135,000 in 1961, Jones, “The Caribbean Community in Britain,” 162.

despite their legal rights to live and work there.⁵⁷ Confident that her twenty years experience as a writer, editor, teacher, and organizer would help her secure meaningful work, Jones hoped to find political, social, and intellectual communities similar to those she had helped create in the United States. It would take her several years to find her footing in the U.K., however, as she confronted at best neglect and at worst racism and sexism from many of her new comrades in the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), most of whom barely paid her any attention. She later told friends that the CPGB leadership had complained she “was dumped as an invalid” on the Party.⁵⁸

Like many West Indians in postwar London, Jones had difficulty securing decent paying work and affordable housing in the face of racism from employers and landlords. Despite her stature in the international communist movement and her successful career in the U.S., the CPGB leaders arranged first for her to be hired and then fired from a low skill job at the China News Agency’s London office.⁵⁹ Although the Party’s officials expected her to participate in its activities and committees, especially when “matters affecting the West Indies are under discussion,” she never held national office in the CPGB, a contrast to her official participation in the CPUSA’s highest levels.⁶⁰ Jones knew that she had more to offer than the mostly white and

⁵⁷ For accounts of Jones’s life and work in the U.K., see Johnson, *I Think of My Mother*, 65-94; Sherwood, *Claudia Jones: Life in Exile*; Boyce Davies, *Claudia Jones: Beyond Containment*, 154-156.

⁵⁸ Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx*, 224; Claudia Jones to Stretch Johnson, no date, AMC at MML.

⁵⁹ Claudia Jones to Idris Cox, Box 2, CJMC at SCRBC; Johnson, *I Think of My Mother*, 67-68.

⁶⁰ Idris Cox to Claudia Jones, May 21, 1963, CJMC at SCRBC. Idris Cox was the Secretary of the CPGB’s Welsh district.

male CPGB leadership imagined, and she was openly critical about the lack of women and Black people in the Party's top ranks, as she had been in the United States.

As an American Popular Fronter, Jones's experiences of racism, as well as civil and workers' rights victories in the U.S. during 1930s and 1940s, raised expectations for political possibilities in her new homeland. She certainly had higher hopes for the role that she and other women could play in the Party, and for what the Party could achieve for Black Britons. In a BBC television broadcast in 1989, Trevor Carter and Billy Strachan, both influential Black CPGB and Caribbean Labour Congress members who became two of her closest allies, affectionately remembered how Jones influenced their thinking about race and gender. "Her attitude and analysis of racism was something new to us," Carter recalled. "She was seen as a working-class intellectual, different and American, but someone with whom everyone felt they could identify."⁶¹ In the 1950s, Jones "brought this very consciousness to us," and challenged them to recruit more women. "We had women but they made the tea," he said to Strachan; "I think we lacked enough women to take an interest," Strachan replied.⁶² Jones also challenged Carter and Strachan to demand more in their campaigns for equality in transportation jobs. London's bus companies, for example, had begun to hire Black men as conductors, but Jones asked "what

⁶¹ Quoted in *Claudia Jones: A Woman of Our Times*, directed by Ingrid Lewis for BBC Television. Broadcast on *Eye to Eye*, BBC London, aired September 18, 1989. A fellow Trinidadian, Carter was active in the British labor and anti-colonialism movements, the Labour Party, and the CPGB. See Trevor Carter, *Shattering Illusions: West Indians in British Politics* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1986).

⁶² Quoted in *Claudia Jones: A Woman of Our Times*. Born in Jamaica, Strachan served in the RAF and moved to the UK in 1947. He was a founding member of the Movement for Colonial Freedom, and a close friend of Cheddi Jagan, political activist in British Gaiana (later Guyana). See "Billy Strachan: Obituary," *The Times London*, May 22, 1998.

about being made inspectors?” recalled Strachan. “[W]e hadn’t even foreseen [that] because we thought we had achieved a helluva lot just getting people in transport.”⁶³

In her initial years in London, Jones lived in other exiled CPUSA members’ homes—when she was not recuperating in the hospital—and then relied on donations from friends and comrades in the United States to cobble together her rent every month.⁶⁴ She first stayed with American communist Mikki Doyle, who had arrived in the U.K. in 1953 with her Scottish-born husband Charlie, a prominent labor leader, after the U.S. government had deported him under the Internal Security Act of 1950. Although Doyle had participated in multiracial demonstrations and campaigns in New York (she lost sight in one eye to anticommunist violence during a 1949 protest supporting Paul Robeson), she did not have “much contact with people in the black community” in London. “But they all knew about Claudia,” Doyle remembered. “[A]ll these young black men and women would come to the house, all hours, they were all very anxious to meet Claudia.”⁶⁵

While young Black Britons may have welcomed Jones to London, the U.K. government decidedly did not, and refused to recognize her British citizenship rights. For a number of years it denied her requests for a British passport, which ironically prevented her from traveling outside its borders. The Passport Office did once offer to authorize a trip to Trinidad for health reasons, but in a letter that Jones interpreted as “carrying a strong hint of the ‘colonial go home.’”⁶⁶ In

⁶³ Quoted in *Claudia Jones: A Woman of Our Times*.

⁶⁴ Claudia Jones to Stretch Johnson, April 21, 1956, Box 2, File 5, HJHP at TLNYU.

⁶⁵ Quoted in *Claudia Jones: A Woman of Our Times*; Ken Gill, “Mikki Doyle,” *The Independent*, December 12, 1995. Doyle later became the Women’s Editor of the CPGB’s *Morning Star* newspaper.

⁶⁶ Claudia Jones to Eric Williams, July 23, 1957, Box 1, File 5, CJMC at SCRBC.

1960, five years after her first application, the British government finally issued Jones a passport, just in time for her to travel to the USSR, Japan, and China. But she still lived under the threat of deportation just as she had in the U.S., fighting for her citizenship rights, freedom of movement, and equal treatment under the law. On top of this, she had to fight for basic recognition, not to speak of a position of substance, within the international communist movement she had done so much to build.

Reimagining the Popular Front in the West Indian Gazette

After several years of shuttling between hospital wards, other people's homes, and flats she could not afford during a national housing shortage, Jones was leading a precarious personal life in 1958, but had found new purpose in her profession. That January, with donations from some of her old U.S. comrades, she published the inaugural issue of her newspaper, the *West Indian Gazette (WIG)*, which, as a British journalist later reported, "proved to be one of the hardiest of the West Indian papers" founded in the 1950s.⁶⁷

For six years, Jones's newspaper provided a prominent public platform for her radical political vision. As she wrote in her first editorial, *WIG* stood for "a united and independent West Indies, full economic, social, and political equality, and respect for human dignity for West Indians and Afro-Asians in Britain, [and] for peace and friendship between all Commonwealth and world peoples."⁶⁸ The *West Indian Gazette & Afro-Asian-Caribbean News*, as she renamed the paper in 1962, reflected Jones's two decades of experience in the American Popular Front

⁶⁷ W.J. Weatherby, "Alma Mater," *The Guardian*, March 18, 1963.

⁶⁸ Claudia Jones, "Editorial," *West Indian Gazette*, (January 1958). The British Library has an almost complete run of the *West Indian Gazette* on microfilm.

realm of political education and political culture, as well as her belief in the role of culture and history in shaping understandings of race, gender, and national identity.⁶⁹ She published reports on anti-colonialist and civil rights struggles, articles with feminist, anti-racist, and pan-Africanist viewpoints, and reviews of cultural events and publications. The paper also publicized and then reported on mass protests in support of proposed anti-racism legislation in the British Parliament and in solidarity with civil rights movements in South Africa and America.⁷⁰ In exile in the U.K., she led a communist-influenced movement outside the structures of the CPGB, and provided an important medium for a transnational network of Black activists and a Black British Caribbean politics and culture.

In “two crowded, chaotic and untidy rooms” above Theo’s Record Shop, a popular hangout in London’s Southwest Brixton neighborhood, Jones and a skeletal volunteer staff produced a first-rate publication for the West Indian Windrush generation.⁷¹ The *WIG* encouraged the formation of a Black British political identity in a community with varied nationalities and ethnicities, and provided a dialogue between West Indians, Africans, and South

⁶⁹ For more on the *WIG*’s significance in British culture and politics, see Donald Hinds, “The *West Indian Gazette*: Claudia Jones and the Black Press in Britain,” *Race & Class* 50, no. 1 (2008): 88-97; Bill Schwarz, “Claudia Jones and the *West Indian Gazette*: Reflections of the Emergence of Post-Colonial Britain,” *Twentieth Century British History* 14, no. 3 (2003), 264-285; Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx*, 84-95; Perry, *London is the Place for Me*, 128. Boyce Davies argues that the *Gazette* was more “internationalist in scope” than her earlier journalism, but Jones’s Popular Front writings similarly focused on international events, particularly about anti-fascism.

⁷⁰ See, for example, the front page stories “South African Police Arrest Children” and “First Antiguan Woman Barrister,” *West Indian Gazette* 3, no. 4 (June 1960); reporting on Martin Luther King Jr.’s visit to London in *West Indian Gazette* 4, no. 12 (December 1961), and articles about women’s experiences in Ghana and Guiana by Essie Robeson and Janet Jagan in *West Indian Gazette* 4, no. 13 (January 1962) and Shirley Graham Du Bois in *West Indian Gazette* 5, no. 11 (June 1963).

⁷¹ Hinds, “*The West Indian Gazette*,” 88.

Asians about the racism they encountered in Britain.⁷² Founded in a year when intense displays of racial hatred erupted in U.K. cities, namely the white riots in London and Nottingham at the end of summer 1958, the *WIG* juxtaposed local neighborhood stories of racism and resistance with reports on global events in the anti-colonial and Civil Rights movements.

Similar to the Young Liberators' *Harlem Organizer* in the 1930s and the CPUSA's *Daily Worker* in the 1940s, the *WIG* carried stories about local protests and cultural events, as well as international politics. From her early days in the YCL, Jones believed in the importance of both Black cultural politics and interracial activities. In *Spotlight* and other Popular Front publications aimed at youth, she had covered interracial dances and organizing campaigns, beauty contests and film reviews. In her new life in exile, Jones highlighted Black cultural expression in the *Gazette* and in the events the paper sponsored.⁷³

Jones did not spend all her time writing and editing the *WIG*, and her Popular Front organizing experiences proved useful in the burgeoning social justice movements in the U.K. and the Commonwealth. As she had in the U.S., she linked local demands for racial and gender justice to transnational movements for self-determination. Her leadership in several U.K.-based anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist organizations, such as the Inter-Racial Friendship Coordinating Committee (IRFCC) and the Movement for Colonial Freedom (MCF), illustrates her influence on the modern civil rights movement in Britain. Popular Front principles remained at the center of her visionary politics, and the legacy of her vision is apparent in these

⁷² Perry, *London is the Place for Me*, 132.

⁷³ See, for example, "African Freedom Concert," *West Indian Gazette* 1, no. 4 (April 1959); announcements for the BBC's broadcast of the Notting Hill Carnival and its beauty contests in *West Indian Gazette* 3, no. 1 (January 1960), Jones, "The Fire Next Time: A Review," *West Indian Gazette* 5, no. 14 (October 1963).

multiracial, cross-class coalitions fighting to expand and protect democratic rights, particularly for Black women.

Another avenue for spreading that vision was the Caribbean Carnival, which Jones founded in 1959. In February of that year, the BBC broadcast coverage of the event for the first time from St. Pancras Hall in London. Jones hoped the carnival might educate white Britons about Caribbean cultural forms and provide an opportunity for transplanted Trinidadians, Jamaicans, and peoples from other Caribbean nations to celebrate their heritage in a new homeland while creating a new collective West Indian identity. In an echo of her father's comments about being proud of her West Indian heritage, Jones connected culture and politics, writing in the Carnival's program that the event was a "testament to the role of the arts in bringing people together for common aims, and to its fusing of the cultural, spiritual, as well as political and economic interests of West Indians in the U.K. and at home."⁷⁴

Cultural events with political aims had been key to Jones's organizing strategies since she first attended the World Youth Congress meeting in New York in 1938. Since then, she had written extensively on how racist representations of Black people in popular culture supported white supremacist legislation and systems of segregation, and how Black people countered such distortions by producing their own cultural representations of Black life in America. Among friends in both the U.S. and the U.K., she was known for reciting from memory Langston Hughes's poem, "Let America Be America Again," at social gatherings.⁷⁵ "Claudia, unlike the

⁷⁴ Claudia Jones, "A people's art is the genesis of their freedom," reprinted in *Claudia Jones: Beyond Containment*, 166.

⁷⁵ See Shapiro, "Red Feminism," 270.

rest of us,” Trevor Carter later told a journalist, “understood the power of culture as a tool of political resistance.”⁷⁶

The *WIG* office had a gravitational pull for local Brixton residents, and for Black politicians, activists, and celebrities from the West Indies, the United States, and Africa. “It was truly the cultural center for Blacks in Britain,” recalled Donald Hinds, who at age twenty-four began writing for the paper during time off from his job as a London bus conductor, and later became a novelist.⁷⁷ Many world leaders, sports stars, and famous entertainers—from Cheddi Jagan, the Premier of British Guiana, to Sir Learie Constantine, renowned cricketer—participated in *WIG* sponsored events designed to publicize West Indian culture and to protest racism in Britain.⁷⁸

Not only the famous found their way to Jones and her newspaper’s office above the music shop. On Saturday mornings, one volunteer writer reported in 1961, “the never-ending queue of West Indians knocking on the *WIG*’s door to file complaints about colour-bar practices” bumped into activists, many of them young women, who had “come to lick stamps and to write.”⁷⁹ And of course since this was Jones’s newspaper, the article added that young people also came with “stories of inter-racial experiences that reject racialism,” affirming her Popular

⁷⁶ Quoted in Gary Younge, “The Politics of Partying,” *The Guardian*, August 17, 2002.

⁷⁷ Born in Jamaica in 1934, Hinds moved to the U.K. in 1955. Ian Thomson, “Here to Stay: Donald Hinds came from Jamaica to work on the buses in the 1950s,” *The Guardian*, August 29, 2009. For Hinds’s reflections on working at the *Gazette*, see Hinds, “The *West Indian Gazette*,” 88-97.

⁷⁸ See, for example, the *WIG*’s anniversary concert featuring Paul Robeson, Cy Grant, and Peggy Seeger in *West Indian Gazette* 3, no. 5 (September 1960); photograph of Jones with Cheddi Jagan in *West Indian Gazette* (October 1961).

⁷⁹ Ken Kelly, “A Day in the Life at the Gazette,” *West Indian Gazette*, vol. 3, no. 6, May 1961.

Front belief in the necessity of multiracial activism against racism.⁸⁰ Jones continued, just as in the YCL days in the U.S., to champion young people’s potential for creative and intellectual writing despite their lack of formal education, providing opportunities for inexperienced writers and activists to learn new skills. She found the resources in 1959 (most likely from her old friends Paul and Essie Robeson who were living in England that summer) to send Donald Hinds to the international communist movement’s Seventh World Festival of Youths and Students in Vienna, perhaps imagining that it would propel him into a career similar to hers.⁸¹

Sitting amidst the “fresh new ideas floating in the air, [and] the click-clack of busy typewriters,” Jones created a newspaper that was lively and informative, theoretically rich but written in layperson’s language, and full of cultural and political reportage.⁸² She put to good use her decades-long career reporting for the *Daily Worker*, editing magazines like *Spotlight*, and writing pamphlets for Popular Front campaigns in the United States. The *WIG* pages reflected her lessons in Party training schools and on communist publications’ editorial boards. Jones “recognized that the coloured community needed to be organized and that they needed a form of self-expression,” claimed David Pitt, a Grenada-born Trinidadian socialist politician and medical doctor who in 1961 became the first Black Briton to win a seat on the London City Council.⁸³

The *WIG* “has sought to reflect the hopes and aspirations of West Indians for nationhood,” wrote Jones on the newspaper’s two-year anniversary. “It has critically analyzed

⁸⁰ Kelly, “A Day in the Life at the Gazette.”

⁸¹ Hinds, “*The West Indian Gazette*,” 133; Ransby, *Eslanda*, 250. The Robesons’s son, Paul Jr., attended the festival, and Paul Sr. sang at its closing event.

⁸² Kelly, “A Day in the Life at the Gazette.”

⁸³ “Claudia Jones Memorial Issue,” *West Indian Gazette*, vol. 8, no. 2, February 1965.

the problems confronting the West Indies in its path to political independence.”⁸⁴ Paying equal attention to the problems challenging West Indians in the U.K., the newspaper covered campaigns to support or oppose potential legislation in Parliament that would affect Black Britons. Threaded through every article, book review, and editorial was Jones’s deeply held belief in self-determination and liberation. She insisted that the Caribbean peoples’ rich traditions and struggles for emancipation were central to the British national narrative, indispensable to a proper understanding of British history.

By the late 1950s, Jones saw evidence worldwide that “an oppressed people have decided it can no longer bear the weight of oppression,” as she wrote to her old friend Stretch Johnson.⁸⁵ The intensifying battles over Jim Crow segregation and civil rights legislation in the American South, and renewed calls for self-determination in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean in the postwar period offered her plenty to write about in her newspaper. Throughout the life of the *WIG*, she interpreted American domestic and foreign policy within a framework of white supremacy and imperialism. A 1960 issue, for example, places her editorial about Jim Crow segregation in New Orleans next to a story about U.S. aircraft carriers in Caribbean waters ready to intervene in Guatemala and Nicaragua. “Imperialism is the root cause of racialism,” she wrote in 1963. “It is the ideology, which upholds colonial rule and exploitation. It preaches the ‘superiority’ of the white race whose ‘destiny’ it is to rule over those with coloured skins, and to treat them with contempt.”⁸⁶ For Jones, the imperialism of the British Empire and that of American corporations with multinational interests and the U.S. government’s military industrial-complex (domestic and

⁸⁴ Jones, “Editorial,” *West Indian Gazette*, vol. 3, no. 9, September 1960.

⁸⁵ Claudia Jones to Stretch Johnson, April 21, 1956, Box 2, File 5, CJMP at SCRBC.

⁸⁶ Claudia Jones, “Editorial,” *West Indian Gazette* 5, no. 15 (December 1963).

abroad) were no different in this respect. In both the civil rights and the anti-colonialism movements, she asserts, “[W]hat is new of course is that at long last the Negro people themselves are finding their own slogans and forms of struggle to correspond to the needs of the moment.”⁸⁷ Self-determination, she argues, remained pivotal to these new demands.

In a 1960 *WIG* profile, Jones describes Trinidadian intellectual and politician Eric Williams as the “personification of the dreams, hopes, and aspirations of those who desire an independent West Indies,” but also took him to task for not nationalizing the U.S.- and British-owned oil fields on Trinidad and Tobago. “One cannot truly reject colonial control of one’s political independence,” she wrote, “and simultaneously accept the bondage of one’s productive resources.”⁸⁸ Here, in her recognition that political independence in a post-imperial arrangement would not mean liberty without economic independence as well, her Marxist materialism came to the fore.

But it was Marxism without institutional backing. The *WIG* did not enjoy any financial support from the CPGB, and Jones struggled to publish it every month. While she never made much more than \$50 a week in her journalist career in the US, she had no salary at all in the U.K. and had to rely on advertising, sales, and donations to cover both the newspaper’s office and printing costs, and her own upkeep. “For as usual, I came up with very little,” she wrote to her old friend and fellow former political prisoner Henry Winston in 1963, “which is a more or less ‘normal’ state of my existence.”⁸⁹ She also continued to criticize the CPGB’s national leadership

⁸⁷ Claudia Jones to Stretch Johnson, April 21, 1956, Box 2, File 5, CJMP at SCRBC.

⁸⁸ Jones, “Dr. Eric Williams: Conscience of Caribbean Nationalism,” *West Indian Gazette*, vol. 3, no. 4 (December 1960).

⁸⁹ Claudia Jones to Henry Winston, July 4, 1963, Box 149, folder 25, CPUSA Records, TLNYU.

for its lack of attention to Black people's struggles in the U.K.. During the Bristol Bus Boycott in 1963, she praised local communists for forming a coalition with university students and West Indian workers, but complained about the coverage of the boycott in Britain's communist press. "I quite naturally expect that the *Daily Worker* as a communist journal would be foremost in fighting the colour-bar," she wrote in a Letter to the Editor.⁹⁰

She did, however, still have access to her network of famous and influential political activists, including the Robesons.⁹¹ Although Essie Robeson never joined the Communist Party, she had supported Jones in numerous ways before her imprisonment, and they kept up a correspondence after her exile to London. In 1954, Robeson had written the introduction to one of Jones's pamphlets on the Red Scare, in which she described her as a "tall, attractive, warm brown woman [who] is a brilliant and dynamic leader," situating her in a long line of Black women activists including Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth.⁹² Robeson herself contributed a number of articles to the *West Indian Gazette*, and she and Paul Robeson appeared at a number of *Gazette*-sponsored events and protests.

From her new home, Jones also kept up her friendships with Henry Winston, Stretch Johnson, and other American comrades through letters and the occasional transatlantic phone call, often asking them for contributions to the *WIG*.⁹³ But she also "dug new roots, won new

⁹⁰ Claudia Jones to George Matthews, May 7, 1963, AMC at MML.

⁹¹ For an account of the Robesons' time in the U.K. and their friendship with Jones, see Ransby, *Eslanda*, 256-270.

⁹² Eslanda Robeson, Foreword to Claudia Jones, *Ben Davis: Fighter for Freedom*, reprinted in *Claudia Jones: Beyond Containment*, 123.

⁹³ See letters from Claudia Jones to Stretch Johnson and Henry Winston in the Abhimanyu (Manu) Manchanda Collection (AMC) at MML and Claudia Jones Memorial Collection at SCRBC.

comrades and friends among all races,” remembered Manu Manchanda, a close friend and fellow communist, “and worked night and day to organize the West Indians in Britain.”⁹⁴ With few resources and no official sponsors, Jones managed to recreate a multiracial network of influential politicians and activists.

For years, Manchanda served as the *WIG*’s Managing Editor, helping to solicit articles and funds for the monthly publication, particularly when Jones was either in the hospital for her heart condition or away on trips to the USSR and Japan at the invitation of international women’s and peace organizations. A veteran of the Indian freedom movement, he told friends that India had revoked his citizenship for being a communist and that the British Communist Party had rejected him because he was Indian. In a speech he gave in 1956, Manchanda espoused solidarity for civil rights struggles in America (including the efforts to desegregate the University of Alabama) and for self-determination in British Cyprus. Like Jones, he promoted social and cultural activities for working-class communities.⁹⁵ He and Jones often lived together but seemed to have had a contentious personal and professional relationship.⁹⁶ They bonded over communist and anti-colonialist politics, and perhaps also over their exclusion from Britain’s Communist Party. Many years later, his wife (whom he married long after Jones’s death) claimed that the

⁹⁴ Manu Manchanda, “Eulogy,” *West Indian Gazette* 7, no. 1 (January 1965).

⁹⁵ Manchanda was also the General Secretary of the Indian Workers Association in Britain. See “Report of A. Manchanda on the occasion of the 9th Indian Independence Day,” AMC at MML.

⁹⁶ Correspondence between Jones and Manchanda reveal the ups and downs of their personal and professional relationship. See, for example, an early letter from Jones to Manchanda addressed to “Dear sweet darling,” Claudia Jones to Manu Manchanda, November 11, 1957, AMC at MML.

CPGB told both Jones and Manchanda, “We don’t want colonial comrades to play a leading role.”⁹⁷

While the CPGB kept her at arm’s length, Jones found a more welcoming political home in Britain’s anti-colonialism and anti-racist movements, and this extended the reach of her personal network. Famous Pan-Africanist Amy Ashwood Garvey became a close friend, joining the *WIG*’s editorial board and working with Jones in the leadership of several new organizations, such as the Inter-Racial Friendship Coordinating Committee (IRFCC) and the Committee of Afro-Asian-Caribbean Organizations (CAACO).⁹⁸ Jones also worked closely with Fenner Brockway, a socialist Member of Parliament and anti-colonial activist, who had co-founded the Movement for Colonial Freedom (MCF) in 1954. At its height, the MCF had over three million members and the support of twenty trade unions. The MCF, wrote Brockway in 1960, “stands not only for the political freedom and the independence of all peoples, but for their freedom from military and economic domination.”⁹⁹

Despite its chronic underfunding, the *WIG* provided Jones with a center of gravity amidst personal upheavals and political turmoil. She managed to publish a substantive issue almost every month for nearly seven years. Through evictions and hospital stays, death threats and surveillance by Scotland Yard, Jones amplified the voices of Black women and men demanding

⁹⁷ Diane Langford, “Letter to the Editor,” *The Guardian*, January 18, 1989.

⁹⁸ For more on Amy Ashwood Garvey, see Martin, *Amy Ashwood Garvey*; Perry, *London is the Place for Me*, 136-139; 183-184; Ransby, *Eslanda*, 270; Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx*, 64.

⁹⁹ Fenner Brockway, “What is the M.C.F.?” 1960, British Library pamphlet collection. For more on Fenner Brockway, see Brockway, Fenner. *Towards Tomorrow: The Autobiography of Fenner Brockway*. London: Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, Ltd., 1977.

equal treatment in Britain and self-determination for its former colonies.¹⁰⁰ She offered insistent analyses of the connection between imperialism and capitalism. In exile but still under threat of deportation despite her British citizenship, Jones was often flat broke, a situation that frequently brought her into perilous contact with the state. She bounced checks, failed to pay her rent and her car insurance, and at least once had to appear in court for nonpayment to creditors. Under the Commonwealth Immigration Act of 1962, she could be subject to deportation for such appearances. Still, as part of this multiracial group of activists, she found ways to influence the civil rights and anti-colonial movements in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In the newspaper's pages, she supported a notion of American and British citizenship that was multiethnic, multiracial, and universal, and argued that both U.S. and U.K. legislation reflected the governments' fear of a successful multiracial, working-class movement for race, gender, and class equality. Her Popular Frontism never wavered.

Remaking the Popular Front in Britain's Civil Rights and Anti-Colonialism Organizations

In the late 1950s, against the backdrop of increased violence against Black people in the U.K. and proposed legislative restrictions on freedom of movement from the West Indies and other British colonies, Jones and her contributing writers hoped to mobilize a multiracial and cross-class movement in support of the Black struggle for equal citizenship rights in Britain and against colonialism around the globe. Jones believed, just as she had in the United States, that Black women would be at the forefront of these movements. She continued to create or participate in organizations that practiced anti-racist and feminist politics. The *WIG* covered

¹⁰⁰ The Union Movement, the U.K. version of the KKK, sent Jones a threatening letter in 1959. Schwarz, "Claudia Jones and the *West Indian Gazette*," 283; Hinds, "The *West Indian Gazette*," 129.

news about women's leadership roles in protests against white supremacist violence and racism in the U.K.'s criminal justice system, and in solidarity actions for anti-colonial movements in Kenya and South Africa, among others. She believed, as she had since her first demonstrations in Harlem in the 1930s, in the power of collective action to protest employers' and governments' racist and discriminatory policies, as well as white violence and police harassment.

In 1959, Jones and Garvey had formed the IRFCC in response to the murder of a young Black Briton, Kelso Cochrane, at the hands of two white men in London. The IRFCC's leadership also included Manchanda, Pearl Connor (a well-known Trinidadian singer and actress), and Eleanor Ettlinger, who had arrived in Britain as a German refugee in the 1930s. Jones and other members of the IRFCC led a delegation to the Home Secretary, head of the British government's department responsible for domestic affairs, to demand that the government investigate racial violence and discrimination in London.¹⁰¹ Invoking the language of lynching, the IRFCC's women leaders connected Cochrane's death to the legacy of white supremacy and the U.K. government's legislative efforts to marginalize Black Britons.

Much as in the case of Emmett Till's violent murder in the U.S. in 1955, the British state did not punish those responsible for Kelso Cochrane's death, and news of the murder made headlines worldwide. Drawing on almost twenty years of experience in anti-lynching demonstrations in the U.S., Jones helped to plan a comprehensive organizing strategy around Cochrane's killing to publicize rising cases of racial violence and discrimination in London. The IRFCC planned and organized a funeral for Cochrane that drew thousands of mourners and spectators, and became, by design, both a public mourning and a political protest. The campaign

¹⁰¹ Pilkington, *Beyond the Mother Country*, 143; Perry, *London is the Place for Me*, 139; see IRFCC Press Release in *West Indian Gazette* 2, no. 3 (June 1959).

inspired a generation of activists to challenge the British government's policies that denied Black Britons their citizenship rights and interpreted them as outside the British national identity.¹⁰²

Throughout the next few years, Jones joined and reported on mobilizations that connected the American civil rights struggle to protests against Britain's racist immigration policies and apartheid in South Africa. In 1961, Jones and Essie Robeson formed the All African Women's Freedom Movement (AAWFM) with the intention of building Pan-African solidarity among activists who championed women's rights and leadership. As Robeson announced in a speech at an AAWFM event, "I do believe that women have an important and urgent role to play in our new world."¹⁰³ That year, they also hosted an event for Martin Luther King, Jr.'s visit to London, and helped plan a large anti-apartheid demonstration at Trafalgar Square that drew thousands of participants and marked the beginning of the international movement against the racist South African government.¹⁰⁴

Meanwhile the *WIG* continued to publish articles about the Freedom Riders in the American South and reviews of African-American art forms, such as the film based on Lorraine Hansberry's play, *Raisin in the Sun*, which Jones called "an insight in the struggle for human dignity and decency in an America that dazzles with wealth and boasts of democracy."¹⁰⁵ The

¹⁰² Perry, *London is the Place for Me*, 153.

¹⁰³ Ransby, *Eslanda*, 263.

¹⁰⁴ Ransby, *Eslanda*, 258; Perry, *London is the Place for Me*; *WIG* articles.

¹⁰⁵ Jones, "Raisin in the Sun," *West Indian Gazette* (July 1961). The *WIG* covered civil rights events in both the U.S. and the U.K—often side-by-side on the same page. See, Eslanda Robeson, "Black Revolution & White Back-lash," *West Indian Gazette & Afro-Asian-Caribbean News*, (August – September 1964); "London Forum's confidence in U.S. Negro fight," *West Indian Gazette & Afro-Asian-Caribbean News*, (August – September 1964).

AAWFM also sponsored an annual event that featured women political activists from Morocco, Somalia, Malawi and other countries of the African diaspora.

Increasingly though, Jones turned the majority of her attention to the U.K.'s efforts to reduce the arrivals of Black people to its shores. The *WIG* became a key site of resistance to the Commonwealth Immigrants Act. Despite organized protest from the popular Movement for Colonial Freedom and other groups, Parliament began debating the proposed legislation in 1961, and passed it in April 1962. Jones was an active participant in MCF events. "There was hardly a meeting in support of the colonial people or against racial discrimination when Claudia was not there," remembered Fenner Brockway.¹⁰⁶ The Act gave the British Home Office control over all Commonwealth citizens' entry into and deportation from the U.K., and required that all British citizens from countries in the Commonwealth who wished to relocate to Britain must provide documentation from the Ministry of Labor that they had a job or an alternate means to support themselves in the UK. The government's voucher system allowed Britain's national health system to recruit nurses and other hospital workers from the West Indies by providing them with work permits, but many employers discriminated against recent arrivals from the islands. New penalties for joblessness or petty crime justified deportation orders.¹⁰⁷

In the pages of the *WIG* and on British television, Jones compared the Commonwealth Immigrants Act to America's Jim Crow system and attacks on free speech in the name of

¹⁰⁶ Fenner Brockway, *West Indian Gazette & Afro-Asian-Caribbean News*, vol. 8, no. 3, April/May 1965.

¹⁰⁷ For more on the Commonwealth Immigration Act of 1962, see Perry, *London is the Place for Me*; Johnson, *I Think of My Mother*, 141-145. For Jones's critique of the Commonwealth Immigrants Bill, see her "Editorial," *West Indian Gazette*, (December 1961) and "The New Brockway Bill," *West Indian Gazette & Afro-Asian-Caribbean News* (December 1963); Claudia Jones, "Butler's Colour-Bar Mocks Commonwealth," *West Indian Gazette* 4, no. 11 (November 1961).

anticommunism. As she told a BBC reporter in a television segment filmed in the *WIG* office, the government's immigration policy "has acted as a deterrent against [West Indians] coming to the UK, and in fact that was the intention of the Act, which many of us consider a colour-bar bill."¹⁰⁸ The Commonwealth Immigrants Act, she claimed, further denigrated the meaning of citizenship for Black Britons, codifying discriminatory treatment in the criminal justice system, hiring practices, and daily life. Facing the "difficulties of making ends meet in societies like ours," as she wrote to Manchanda in 1962, Jones directly experienced the challenges of finding affordable housing and economic support for her journalism.¹⁰⁹

Jones argued that two particular parts of the legislation would entrench second-class citizenship for Black Britons like her. First, its demand for proof of a job and economic independence disproportionately affected Commonwealth citizens who lived in the formerly colonized countries of the British Empire. Second, it gave the Home Office the right to deport Commonwealth citizens based only on the recommendation of local law enforcement. Connecting legal migration to the labor market put non-white citizens, who wanted to move to Britain precisely because hundreds of years of colonialism meant fewer job prospects in their home countries, at a disadvantage. Yet still people left their homelands because, as Jones wrote in 1964, "prospects have not yet qualitatively improved for the vast majority of the West Indian

¹⁰⁸ See footage of BBC 1963 interview with Jones in *Claudia Jones: A Woman of Our Times*. Kennetta Hammond Perry writes that, for Jones, the Act was "nothing more than Jim Crow refashioned in British regalia." Perry, "U.S. Negroes, Your Fight is Our Fight," 13.

¹⁰⁹ Claudia Jones to Manu Manchanda, October 25, 1962, Abhimanyu (Manu) Manchanda Collection (AMC) at MML

workers and people, inhibited by the tenaciousness of continued Anglo-American imperialist dominance over West Indian economic life.”¹¹⁰

Jones recognized the Act as a threat to democracy and free speech as it allowed for the “deportation of citizens in violation of the principle that a person is innocent of a crime until proved guilty, and in violation of the principle of freedom of political thought.”¹¹¹ As a non-citizen, a communist, and a Black woman, Jones had lived under this type of threat for over fifteen years in the United States, but now her British citizenship could fail to protect her from the threat of deportation from the United Kingdom.¹¹² The government’s new parameters for deportation changed Black Britons’ relationship to the state, and gave law enforcement and employers more control over Black Britons’ lives. The Act essentially redefined British citizens from the West Indies as de facto “immigrants” without explicitly reclassifying them as such.¹¹³

As she had learned and taught in communist-affiliated workers’ and training schools, Jones invariably included a call to action in her *WIG* editorials. In her public speeches and political writings, she displayed what famed Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm, who knew her through the Stars Campaign for Inter-racial Friendship, recalled as, “an air of power and calm assurance, and the usual non-rhetorical efficiency which was the hallmark of so many people trained in the school of the Party.”¹¹⁴ As a member of the Movement for Colonial Freedom and

¹¹⁰ Jones, “The Caribbean Community in Britain,” 168.

¹¹¹ Jones, “Butler’s Colour-Bar Mocks Commonwealth.”

¹¹² Claudia Jones, “I Spent a Night in the Notting Hill Police Station,” *West Indian Gazette* (February 1962).

¹¹³ Perry, *London is the Place for Me*, 176.

¹¹⁴ Eric Hobsbawm to Marika Sherwood, January 13, 1998, Marika Sherwood Papers, SCRBC, NYPL.

the Committee of Afro-Asian-Caribbean Organizations, she appeared at numerous events to oppose the Commonwealth Immigrants Act. She and Fenner Brockway organized a series of protests that involved high-level politicians and state officials from India, Nigeria, the West Indies, and elsewhere, as well as working-class Black Britons. In February 1962, during an official government Lobby Day, Jones mobilized “nurses, drivers, conductors, postmen, guards, professionals” to show up in “national dress and work uniforms” to meet with Members of Parliament.¹¹⁵

Meanwhile, Jones also continued to articulate her feminist politics, criticizing movements and policies that discriminated against women. In January 1962, she and Essie Robeson sponsored a “We Thank the Women” event to celebrate women’s activism in anti-colonial organizations. “It is not enough to honour the women,” she wrote, “what was necessary was to translate the agreement that women were equal into practical terms.” Calling out men who, even when “speaking of freedom and independence actually exclude their wives and sisters,” she demanded that women be rid of the burden of double discrimination performing labor at home and the workplace.¹¹⁶

While she continued to get the cold shoulder from the CPGB, Jones found warm welcomes from fellow attendees at the WIDF conference held in the USSR in the summer of 1962 and at the World Conference Against Hydrogen and Atom Bombs in Japan, two years later.¹¹⁷ Fulfilling a lifelong dream, she spent several months in Russia, where she reunited with

¹¹⁵ Jones, “Lobby Day,” *West Indian Gazette* (February 1962).

¹¹⁶ Claudia Jones, “We Thank the Women,” *West Indian Gazette* 4, no. 13 (January 1962).

¹¹⁷ See Claudia Jones, “Visit to the U.S.S.R.,” *West Indian Gazette*, (December 1962) and Jones, “First Lady of the World: I Talk with Mme Sun Yat-Sen,” *West Indian Gazette & Afro-Asian-Caribbean News*, 6, no 6 (November 1964); Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx*, 226.

her old friend Henry Winston, met Soviet cosmonauts, and recuperated in a Moscow hospital. In a series of articles published in *WIG* several months later, she enthused about Soviet women's opportunities for equal education, and about the medical care she received from women doctors. "My body has responded to rest as a thirsty traveller walks to an oasis in the desert," she wrote to Manchanda in August.¹¹⁸ During her trip to Asia, she visited a number of cities in Japan and China, interviewed Madame Sun Yet-Sen, and met Chairman Mao. As with many official guests of the Soviet and Chinese governments, much of what Jones experienced was a mirage, curated by state officials, but still she must have welcomed the chance to be celebrated as valued leader and intellectual.

On her return to the U.K. after each trip, Jones continued in her attempts to build Popular Front-style coalitions. In the spring of 1963, she formed CAACO, an umbrella organization that brought together a number of local efforts focused on anti-racism and anti-colonialism. Discrimination in housing, employment, and freedom of movement had increased after the passage of the Commonwealth Act, a policy that Jones considered to be "legalized apartheid."¹¹⁹ The London-based group passed resolutions in support of the United Nations charter on human rights, solicited signatures for petitions decrying white supremacy and violence against Black Americans addressed to the U.S. government, and held public protest meetings outside the U.S. Embassy. Connecting the American and British Black freedom struggles, Jones insisted that white supremacy and racial violence denied non-white peoples' rights to full citizenship on both sides of the Atlantic.

¹¹⁸ Claudia Jones to Manu Manchanda, August 31, 1962, AMC at MML.

¹¹⁹ Jones, *West Indian Gazette* 4, no. 14 (February 1962).

On August 31, 1963, Jones and 750 other protestors marched through London's streets to the U.S. Embassy in a solidarity action with the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, organized by A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin. A few days earlier, the event had drawn a quarter of a million people to America's capital, where they heard Martin Luther King, Jr. give his "I have a dream" speech. Singing the U.S. Civil Rights movement's anthem, "We Shall Overcome," Jones and the multiracial crowd, which included members of the Young Communist League (YCL) and the Young Socialists (YS), held aloft signs and banners that linked the struggles against apartheid in South Africa, Jim Crow in Alabama, and white riots and immigration restrictions in Britain.¹²⁰ In a display of her lifelong commitment to Popular Front visions of internationalism and anti-colonialism, the petition that CAAOC members addressed to President John F. Kennedy and delivered to the U.S. Embassy in London connected the American Civil Rights movement to liberation struggles around the world.

The symbolism of Jones's helping to lead YCL and YS members in a London march, one that paralleled the March on Washington—itsself the brainchild of Black radicals—captures the centrality of heterodox international radicalisms to a moment popularly remembered as a historical triumph for American liberalism. On both sides of the Atlantic, despite decades of repression, radical communists and feminists, like Jones, played pivotal and ongoing roles in movements for equality and freedom.

¹²⁰ Perry, "U.S. Negroes, Your Fight is Our Fight," 18.

Conclusion

Claudia Jones would not live to see the fruits of her labors in the modern civil rights and women's rights movements. Only forty-nine-years-old, she died in her sleep from a heart attack on December 24, 1964.

Jones is best known today for having founded London's world famous Notting Hill Carnival, her communism domesticated in celebrations of her individual achievements.¹²¹ Although comrades and colleagues kept Jones's memory and legacy alive in Britain's radical circles for decades after her death, only recently have her life and writings received the scholarly and popular attention they deserve.¹²² Yet historians and literary scholars who have recovered Jones from obscurity occasionally replicate Cold War anticommunist tropes that distance her from her radical Popular Front roots. Using Jones's burial site next to Karl Marx's gravestone as a metaphor for her politics, Carole Boyce Davies titles her biography of Jones, *Left of Karl Marx*. In recovering her subject's radical, political, and intellectual ideas "from erasure," Boyce Davies relocates "them solidly within black, feminist, Caribbean, and allied intellectual traditions."¹²³ Attempting to separate Jones from the Cold War version of Soviet communism, she mistakenly depicts Jones's radical politics as distinct from (and left of) a Popular Front version of twentieth-century American communism.

¹²¹ Charlie Brinkhurst-Cuff, "How a Trinidadian Communist Invented London's Biggest Party," *New York Times*, February 19, 2021.

¹²² For remembrances of Claudia Jones see, Johnson, "I Think of My Mother"; Jennifer Tyson and the Camden Black Sisters, *Claudia Jones, 1915-1964: A Woman of Our Times* (London: Camden Black Sisters Publications, 1988); Sherwood, *Claudia Jones: A Life in Exile*.

¹²³ Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx*, 10.

Equating communist theory with the structures of the Communist Party and its relationship to the Soviet Union, Eric McDuffie’s language often echoes Cold War depictions of communists as dupes or fanatics, as when he describes the CPUSA as “grooming [Jones] for leadership.” He likens Jones’s 1955 “Autobiographical History”—which she addressed to the CPUSA’s top leader, William Foster, but intended as a public statement—to “a religious conversion narrative” for its “tone of self-righteous certainty in the eventual defeat of capitalism and racism typically embraced by Communist true believers like Jones.”¹²⁴ Such caricature is misplaced. While Jones believed in the promise of socialism until the end of her life, and certainly closed her eyes to the realities of totalitarian states on visits to the USSR and China, she was also a dissenting voice in the CPUSA and CPGB, grounding her objections to the Parties’ shortcomings in her experiences as a working-class Black woman engaged in grassroots radicalism and visionary politics.

At the time of her death, Jones was both an international celebrity for the anti-colonial left and a local luminary for London’s West Indian and Asian communities. On a cold and wet winter afternoon in January 1965, four hundred of Jones’s friends and allies attended the interment of her ashes, a few feet from Karl Marx’s resting place in London’s Highgate Cemetery. After tributes from admirers worldwide, the funeral procession made its way to the gravesite, singing “We Shall Overcome” and the *Internationale*—anthems for the movements to which she had dedicated her short life. A photograph of the event later printed in the *WIG* depicts ten somber men in suits standing behind Manu Manchanda, who is laying a wreath next to large

¹²⁴ McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*,” 98.

poster honoring her life and work. It reads: “Claudia Jones, Negro Leader and Marxist who dedicated her life to the fight for liberation of all oppressed peoples.”¹²⁵

Lost in this first celebration of her life are her place of birth, Trinidad, and her adopted countries, America and Britain. In this description of her as a “Negro Leader,” her racial identity is rooted not in the specifics of West Indian, American, and British histories of black communities and politics but in a generalized category of race. In equal billing to her racial identity is her ideological and political affiliation—Marxist—a term that also lacks the specificity of her relationships to Communist Parties in different nations. By describing Jones as a fighter for the “liberation of all oppressed peoples,” Manchanda and others erase Jones’s Popular Front theories on the different ways race, class, and gender operate under capitalism.

Almost two decades passed before Jones’s gravesite gained a permanent marker. In 1984, the Afro-Caribbean Organization raised funds for a new headstone that reads, “Claudia Vera Jones, Born Trinidad, Died London 24.12.64. Valiant fighter against racism and imperialism who dedicated her life to the process of socialism and the liberation of her own black people.”¹²⁶ Again, there is no mention of her life in the U.S., but also erased now is her communism. “She was famous then but is now almost forgotten,” wrote a British journalist about Jones when a new play about her life went into production in 1989. “Her communism seems to have ensured her

¹²⁵ “Claudia Jones Memorial Issue,” *West Indian Gazette & Afro-Asian-Caribbean News*, (February 1965); Johnson, *I Think of My Mother*, 161.

¹²⁶ Photograph in the possession of the author. Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx*; Langston, “The Legacy of Claudia Jones,” 94.

obscurity. A black woman can be more or less disregarded but a communist is dangerous and has to be crushed and Claudia was a communist until the end.”¹²⁷

Claudia Jones dedicated her life to supporting women’s leadership in anti-racist, anti-colonialist, and feminist campaigns, and when the organizations around her failed to do the same, she called them out or created her own. Her journalism and organizing careers illustrate the lasting legacies of what working-class women with few resources can accomplish, and the costs of such legacies in the absence of a mass movements and stable organizations. “Women must fight for their own liberation,” she announced at the CPUSA national convention in 1951. In every movement and organization Jones joined, she honored and nurtured “the collective talents of our wonderful women comrades to work, write, sing, and fight for women’s liberation.”¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Michele Hanson, “A True Woman to Her People: Claudia Jones,” *The Guardian*, January 10, 1989.

¹²⁸ Jones, “For the Unity of Women,” 166.

CHAPTER FIVE

“I had a vision”: Legacies and Erasures of Emma Tenayuca’s Popular Front Organizing

“If our country is to be saved, it will be the work of women. There is a good chance to pass the Equal Rights Amendment, and other pieces of legislation. Top priority will be given to Child Care, Education.”

--Emma Tenayuca, 1988¹

“No Marxist person can view the present conditions with apathy or indifference,” Emma Tenayuca fumed in a July 1944 diary entry. Returning from a short stay in Houston to take a temporary job in San Antonio, she expressed anger but not surprise at the “evidences of deep-rooted racial hatred” that she witnessed in her hometown “every day—on the street—on the buses—and in the every day talk of the people.”² During the five years that had passed since escaping a riotous mob outside her Communist Party meeting, she had lived a peripatetic life, shuttling between Houston, San Antonio, and Corpus Christi in search of wage work, educational opportunities, and chances to enact her Popular Frontism.

“I suppose I should try to do something,” she confided to her diary, but the obstacles were daunting. “What is there I can do that will not take money, endanger my job and bring a multitude of difficulties with my family?”³ The New Deal victories that San Antonio’s Popular Front coalitions had achieved over the previous decade—federal resources and jobs, union recognition and contracts for low-wage workers, and the election of a left-liberal mayor—had come under attack from a resurgence of white supremacy and anticommunism. The national and

¹ Emma Tenayuca to Paula (unknown last name), May 14, 1988, Box 2, File, ETP at TWU

² Tenayuca, July 27, 1944, Diary, MSS 420, Box 2, ETP at TWU.

³ Tenayuca, July 27, 1944, Diary, Box 2, MSS 420, ETP at TWU.

local backlash against demands for racial, gender, and economic justice, and full citizenship rights for all Americans had led to new restrictions on free speech, labor and voting rights, and immigration. In 1944, Tenayuca saw little remnant of the successes she had helped achieve through the unemployed movement's mass protests and the pecan-shellers' uprising. "Politically, and economically and socially, the status of the Mexican has not improved," she despaired. "How could it when there is no progressive organization?"⁴

This chapter begins by tracing Tenayuca's personal and political trajectory in the 1940s. From 1938 onward, the local and national effects of the Little Red Scare narrowed the political possibilities for the city's labor-left-community coalitions, the Workers Alliance of America (WAA), and radical-led Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Despite intense anticommunist and white supremacist backlash, Tenayuca and the Popular Front movements had achieved some concrete successes for San Antonio's poorest communities. By 1941, the promise of the New Deal had faded significantly, diminished by the aggressively pro-business, anti-immigrant, and racist political establishment in Texas. Yet, she and other grassroots Popular Front activists continued to organize for Mexican-American and African-American labor and civil rights during World War II and the postwar period, despite minimal institutional support.

The end of her public career as a community and labor organizer came in 1947, when she left Texas for California. Living in exile in San Francisco for the next two decades, she raised a child alone, earned a college degree, and worked in a series of office jobs while struggling to build a politically engaged life and community. Although she never published again, she recorded her theories on electoral politics, culture, and socialism in private diary entries, and attended events at the California Labor School. Without any organizational backing and no

⁴ Tenayuca, July 27, 1944, Diary, Box 2, MSS 420, ETP at TWU.

avenue for collective action or coalition building, she turned instead to her ambition for a career in teaching.

The chapter's second half documents Tenayuca's Popular Front legacy in San Antonio's electoral politics and social movements in the 1960s and 1970s. In her absence, some Popular Front-style campaigns had succeeded in electing a few non-Anglo candidates as local government officials, winning local desegregation legislation, and building an effective (albeit brief) coalition in the Democratic Party. Although anticommunism and white supremacy—unchecked by mass protest or cross-class, multiethnic organizations—had undermined the New Deal, leading to increased economic inequality and unequal development in the city, San Antonio's Popular Frontism had not vanished.

Tenayuca returned permanently to her hometown in 1968. By the 1970s, new organizing arose in West Side communities aiming to carry on the Popular Front's unfinished business. Preoccupied with her teaching career and a set of difficult family circumstances, she participated in these efforts in small but significant ways—canvassing her neighborhood during election campaigns, volunteering through her church, and offering public support for new organizations, such as Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS). Activists in COPS fostered local social movements and built political power to secure civil rights, as well as government resources for the city's poorest neighborhoods.

At the same time, national Chicano/a and women's movements discovered Tenayuca's role in San Antonio's Depression-era social movements, embracing her as a Mexican-American civil rights heroine for her leadership during the pecan-shellers' strike, and identifying her organizing as a precursor to their own activism. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, journalists, politicians, and scholars interviewed her to learn more about her activism in the 1930s. Amidst

the Cold War's final years or immediate aftermath, however, they interpreted her communism as a regrettable but brief mistake, redefining her Popular Frontist visions as liberal New Deal reform efforts for the city's poor and downtrodden. The chapter ends with a consideration of the way her "rediscovery" constituted a new form of anticommunist erasure.

The Making of an Exile

In June 1939, Tenayuca had returned to San Antonio from a months-long trip in New York City, where she attended the Communist Party's national convention.⁵ More than 50 people, including two of her sisters and fellow CPUSA member Nathan Kleban, had gathered at San Antonio's South Pacific railway station to welcome her home. *La Prensa*, a local newspaper, reported that the crowd included many young women willing to direct the activities of the Communist Party. A photographer captured Tenayuca smiling, and striding down the platform arm-in-arm with her sisters.⁶

She had earned a spring in her step. Throughout the late 1930s, San Antonio's Popular Front coalitions had threatened white supremacy and political patronage by organizing to secure citizenship rights, end segregation and discrimination in public and private services, and stop police and vigilante violence. As an organizer, educator, and theorist in the unemployed and labor movements, Tenayuca had mobilized working-class communities in her city to demand civil liberties and labor rights. Meanwhile, WAA- and CIO-led mass protests, strikes, and demonstrations had drawn state, national, and international attention to the city officials'

⁵ Tenayuca, interview by Poyo; Winegarten, "Emma Tenayuca, notes on meeting," March 23, 1983, RWP at UTAustin. In several interviews, Tenayuca expressed her admiration for both Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and William Z. Foster.

⁶ "Regreso Emma Tenayuca Brooks a San Antonio," *La Prensa*, June 9, 1939.

violations of these rights. The radical-led unemployed and labor movements provided a training ground for activists, particularly Mexican Americans, who would pass on stories of their experiences to new generations involved in civil rights campaigns later in the twentieth century. “It was a power struggle,” Tenayuca recounted to a group of union newspaper writers in 1984. “[T]his was the beginning of the end of machine politics, of the system of political patronage.”⁷ With the city’s recent election of a liberal, pro-civil rights Mayor (Maury Maverick) and the twenty thousand strong pecan-shellers’ uprising still fresh in her mind, the future must have seemed promising.

In the short term, it was not to be. Despite finding inspiration in radical traditions on both sides of the border, Tenayuca could not withstand the violent backlash from liberals and conservatives in the city’s business and political leadership. Her insistence that New Deal policies and the American national imaginary include Mexican immigrants, Mexican Americans, and Black Americans threatened San Antonio’s political and economic structures. The city’s anti-New Dealers had concerns about the rise of a powerful left both in Washington DC and in Mexico, and feared the emerging multiracial, cross-class movement in Texas. They responded with an effective weapon: the double-barreled red- and race-baiting.

Tenayuca was a particular target because her prominent roles in the WAA and the pecan-shellers’ uprising had led to a national profile. Articles about her organizing appeared in both *Time* and the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1938. “Who Organized the Unemployed?” reads the headline splashed across the double-spread six-page article in a December issue of the *Saturday Evening Post*. Its answer: the communist leadership of Workers Alliance of America. Next to the headline is a large photograph of a petite young woman with the caption, “She is Emma

⁷ Tenayuca, Speech to Newspaper Guild, ATC.

Tenayuca of San Antonio and a powerful Workers Alliance agitator.”⁸ Despite the prominence of Tenayuca’s image, Stanley High’s lengthy article dedicates just one paragraph to her role in the Alliance, noting that she held an elected seat on its Executive Board and that both she and her husband had run for national office on the Communist Party ticket. Most of its columns and the remainder of its photographs are instead reserved for white men who led the unemployment movement’s lobbying in Washington D.C. and its organizing in the WAA’s strongholds in New York, Minnesota, and Ohio.

With anti-New Deal rhetoric and purple prose, High warns his readership that the WAA had created a working-class consciousness among the unemployed, developed an effective political machine, and, most importantly, built the Communist Party’s Trojan Horse. The unemployed are no longer, he cautions, an “undecorative and troublesome fringe on the body politic,” and have become “members of an established class who regarded permanent succor from the Government as the first of their inalienable rights.” Through collective action and electoral politics an individual WAA member, High argues, can “feel that he is part of an organization which can turn on the heat all the way from the local relief bureau to the Office of the President.” Detailing the WAA’s successful mobilizing in the streets in forty-five states and lobbying on Capitol Hill in Washington DC, High stokes fear that its Communist leadership will make “unemployment an institution and joblessness a career in which...the Government will continue to subsidize them.” At the end of the article, he leaves the reader to imagine the “Trojan

⁸ Stanley High, “Who Organized the Unemployed?,” *Saturday Evening Post*, December 10, 1938, 8.

Horses” in the White House and State Legislatures across the county and what the Communists would do with their potential political power.⁹

In May 1939, San Antonio’s Popular Front coalition, including the communists and socialists of the WAA, had turned out the Mexican-American and Black voters who made the difference for Maverick in the mayor’s race.¹⁰ Maverick had a national reputation for his support of civil liberties and workers’ rights. He publicly sponsored the newly formed El Congreso de Pueblos de Habla Español (National Congress of Spanish-speaking Peoples), a Popular Front organization that advocated for “federal housing projects for the poor, better sanitary and medical care for Spanish-speaking, elimination of racial discrimination,” in addition to jobs for the unemployed, the right to organize, and protection of the foreign-born. Tenayuca, too, had promoted El Congreso in her essay published in the March 1939 issue of *The Communist*.¹¹

As a two-term U.S. Congressman, Maverick had also supported New Deal legislation and labor rights, often taking on big business in his own state. “I believe that if we pass out subsidies for cotton plantation owners and ranchers, and rice growers and all the rest,” he wrote for the *Washington Post* in 1938, then “labor should have some protection too.”¹² He advocated for equal pay for equal work, opportunities for Black Americans to join trade unions, anti-lynching

⁹ High, “Who Organized the Unemployed?,” 36, 32, 36.

¹⁰ Doyle, “Maury Maverick,” 206; Krochmal, *Blue Texas*, 49-50.

¹¹ For more on El Congreso / the Peoples’ Congress, see Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 179-188; Ruiz, *Out of the Shadows*, 94-98; Mario T. Garcia, *Mexican Americans: Leadership, Ideology, and Identity, 1930-1960* (New Haven, CT, 1989), 148. Although Homer Brooks not Tenayuca attended the organization’s first and only national meeting in Los Angeles, they both promoted El Congreso in their co-written essay, “The Mexican Question in the Southwest.”

¹² Maury Maverick, “Maverick Urges South to Join in Progress,” *Washington Post*, May 9, 1938.

legislation, and the protection of free speech, even for communists.¹³ He also successfully secured federal resources for San Antonio and Bexar County, which local officials poured into infrastructure and economic development projects.¹⁴

A few months after his election, on the eve of the CPUSA meeting that led to vigilantes besieging a city building, Mayor Maverick's voice emanated from radios across San Antonio. In an address titled "Communism, Common Sense, and the Constitution," he defended his recent decision to permit the Texas Communist Party to hold its state convention in the Municipal Auditorium, and to uphold all citizens' constitutional rights to free speech and public assembly, even a Party member like the "misguided, radical Mexican girl," twenty-three year old Tenayuca. "In our own country, innocent people were burned as witches," he announced to city residents, "so called witches were literally deprived of life, liberty, and property...so let us beware of modern witch hunts." He reminded listeners that while he was no Communist—and had in fact invited the Dies Committee to San Antonio to investigate local radicals—he was responsible for enforcing equal protection under the Constitution, including for the Communist Party as it was a "legal recognized political party in Texas and in the nation."¹⁵ Hoping to navigate his support for civil liberties and the New Deal through the rampant white supremacy and anticommunism in the city, he attempted both to uphold Tenayuca's constitutional right to free speech and undermine her radical politics.

¹³ Doyle, "Maury Maverick," 198.

¹⁴ Kenneth J. Heineman, "Asserting State's Rights, Demanding Federal Assistance: Texas Democrats in the Era of the New Deal," *Journal of Policy History* 28, no. 2 (2016): 342-374.

¹⁵ "Communism, Common Sense, and the Constitution," radio address transcript, Otto Mullinax Papers, Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin; "Maverick Would Match Dies' Vocal Chords Against Communist Rally," *Austin Statesman*, August 17, 1939; "Maverick Reaffirms Red Rally Permit," *Dallas Morning News*, August 20, 1939.

Maverick's mayoral victory had been heartening in relative terms, but anticommunist attacks on Workers Alliance, the foundation of Tenayuca's activism, were intensifying at the federal and local level. The more success the Popular Fronters had in extending the New Deal to non-Anglos communities and attracting national and international attention to San Antonio's violations of civil liberties, the louder the city officials and elites grew in their denunciations of radicalism. The violence outside the Communist Party meeting and the threats to lynch Maverick in the summer of 1939 had generated no arrests. Government officials focused their efforts on curtailing violence by strikers and radicals, not against them. "In those days," remembers Grace Kroger, an Anglo volunteer with WAA, "anyone who would work to try to do something for the low wage earners, particularly the blacks or those of Mexican descent, the first thing to hurl at them was Communism."¹⁶

The WAA became a flashpoint for reactionary backlash. With its insistence that WPA job and relief recipients were workers with rights rather than paupers on the dole, the WAA helped build a working-class consciousness that in some places led to demands that the National Labor Relations Act should cover all workers. Disrupting the image of white men engaged in industrial labor as the embodiment of the working-class, Tenayuca and other WAA leaders claimed the New Deal's labor rights for themselves and other working-class people of color.¹⁷ They joined forces with Mexican and CIO labor unions, free speech activists, and civil liberties organizers to take on the city's powerful political structure.

¹⁶ Harry and Grace Kroger Oral History, interview by George Green, November 1971, transcript, Texas Labor Archives, University of Texas at Arlington.

¹⁷ Goldberg, *Citizens and Paupers*, 108, 115.

The national WAA advocated for interracial organizing, labor rights, and government investment in local economic development. At its annual convention in 1938, the Alliance's multiracial Executive Board had voted on a national platform that called on the federal government to invest millions of dollars in public housing and health projects, and to extend New Deal wage codes and workers' rights to WPA worksites.¹⁸ In San Antonio, Tenayuca and the WAA's local leadership insisted that local WPA officials recognize their members' federal protections of free speech and the right to organize, and offer equal access to the city's WPA projects.

Local WAA organizers played key roles in the Popular Front coalitions that briefly overpowered San Antonio's Jim Crow-supporting political establishment. They achieved a number of significant, if fleeting, successes for the city's non-Anglo communities. The WAA "did a tremendous job," Tenayuca proudly announced many years later. "All of the housing projects that are here are due to the Workers Alliance."¹⁹ In line with the WAA's demands for federally subsidized public housing for the unemployed, the San Antonio branches supported Maverick's plans for Apache Courts, a new WPA-funded public housing project, and La Villita, a restoration project of one of San Antonio's first neighborhoods that celebrated Mexican-American arts and culture.²⁰ Local pressure from WAA members and their allies ensured that Mexican Americans and Black Americans gained entry to the jobs on these projects. Despite local resistance from AFL unions and racist city officials, Tenayuca later recalled, WAA

¹⁸ "Alliance Urges Hike in Pay of WPA Workers," *Houston Chronicle*, September 27, 1938.

¹⁹ Tenayuca, interview by Poyo, ATC.

²⁰ Maury Maverick to Aubrey Williams, Box 2L52, MMP at UT Austin; Krochmal, *Blue Texas*, 34-55. La Villita was funded by the National Youth Administration and the Carnegie Foundation.

members had won access to “all of the jobs—La Villita, Paseo del Rio (Riverwalk), the Arneson Theater—all of that work.”²¹ At the time, similarly full of pride, Maverick had requested that Franklin D. Roosevelt and Eleanor Roosevelt use La Villita to publicize the New Deal’s success across the nation.²² Maverick too earned accolades from journalists and supporters for his pro-civil liberties liberalism. As his biographer notes, even after the 1939 riot, his “stand produced a torrent of favorable editorial comment in newspapers across the United States.”²³

It was not only radical politics, interracial labor organizing, and demands for full citizenship rights that sparked the backlash against Tenayuca and WAA in San Antonio. She and other grassroots organizers collaborated with radical-affiliated unions on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. The Texas state CIO Council included a number of locals from radical-led unions, including the National Maritime Union, Oil Workers Industrial Union, and the Mine-Mill union.²⁴ Mexico’s Marxist labor leader Vicente Lombardo Toledano had visited San Antonio several times during labor and unemployed movement campaigns in the 1930s. A few months after the pecan strike had ended in 1938, he addressed a crowd of five thousand at a public rally.

These connections between the Mexican and Texan labor movements caused concern among San Antonio’s politicians and business elites. Oil industry magnates and bosses of the agricultural industries worried that Mexico’s strike wave of late 1930s would spread to the U.S., especially after Mexico’s largest union, the radical-led Confederación de Trabajadores de México (CTM), staged a number of strikes against foreign-owned companies in Mexico.

²¹ Tenyuca, interview by Poyo, ATC.

²² Heineman, “Asserting State’s Rights,” 346.

²³ Henderson, *Maury Maverick*, 217.

²⁴ Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 133.

Meanwhile, in 1938, the Cárdenas administration expropriated foreign-owned oil fields and banks, and nationalized the country's railroads and oil companies. In 1940, the CTM held its second annual congress for labor organizers from Mexico and the U.S. in San Antonio.²⁵

In her hometown, Tenayuca came to personify these cross-border connections in statewide newspaper coverage. "Emma was getting money from both the CIO and the Mexican CTM and advice from the CTM head Toledano," wrote a Texas journalist, and she "was helping Toledano organize Tex-Mexes into a Texas branch of the CTM."²⁶ Much like the imagined "Moscow Gold" funding the American Communist Party, it is highly unlikely that the Mexican government provided extensive resources for labor organizing in Texas. Public collaborations between the CIO and CTM, however, caught the attention of local newspapers and politicians. Calling into question her loyalty to the United States by charging her with allegiance to Mexican socialists (as well as Soviet communists), despite her family's Texas roots, was another way to discredit her activism and make it harder for liberals to support her.

Local and national hostility to New Deal politics and policies had begun to shrink the space in which Popular Front activists could expand the boundaries of citizenship, making room instead for the re-establishment of Jim Crow political structures. The federal government began to limit eligibility for relief through new legislation that restricted WPA jobs to residents who could prove their U.S. citizenship, while at the same time newspapers and popular culture refashioned the image of the deserving white citizen-worker down on his luck into one of a WAA member who represented foreignness and un-Americanism. "First they permitted aliens or

²⁵ Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 137.

²⁶ Brian Coyne, "The Nazi-Soviet Pact Bombshell to Texas Communist Party," *Austin American*, September 17, 1939.

non-citizens, then they decided it would be only citizens,” remembered Tenayuca. “So, as soon as one youngster in the family reached an [eligible] age, why we went down [to the WPA] and took him and got jobs.”²⁷ What Tenayuca wanted from the government was not the right of subsidized relief, nor the institutionalization of the unemployed as a permanent class, as the *Saturday Evening Post* feared; she was fighting for equal access and pay for the city’s Mexican, Mexican-American, and African-American populations to both federal jobs with the WPA and local jobs with San Antonio’s biggest industries. Citizens and non-citizens alike, however, faced harassment and threats of deportation in their attempts to hold the government accountable for addressing the economic crisis.

Congress had annually reduced the appropriations allocated to relief efforts during the Second New Deal, and chipped away at the eligibility for applicants. Local and state legislatures did the same, removing foreign-born from the relief rolls, introducing time limits for job assignments, and attempting to disenfranchise aid recipients. All attacked the unemployed movement’s growing political influence and reduced resources for the unemployed. State legislatures in New York, California, and Kansas proposed bills that would strip WPA workers and relief recipients of their voting rights, requiring them to sign loyalty oaths affirming that they were neither an ‘alien’ nor a communist.²⁸ These proposals also denied WPA eligibility to anyone who joined the WAA or any other unemployed organization. The restrictions matched new federal anticommunist legislation, such as the Hatch Act of 1939 that banned communists from federal employment and the Alien Registration Act of 1940 that allowed the government to

²⁷ Tenayuca, interview by Poyo, ATC.

²⁸ Goldberg, *Citizens and Paupers*, 126.

deport members of organizations it deemed subversive.²⁹ The Alien Registration Act led to an increase in discrimination against non-citizen and U.S.-born Mexican Americans, especially those who spoke Spanish and had a “foreign-sounding” name, in New Deal benefits.

Ultimately, federal investigations of WAA’s leadership and new legislation that rolled back New Deal relief policies undermined the movement’s effective organizing of the unemployed and WPA employees. The national WAA and San Antonio’s Popular Front coalitions came under increasing attacks from federal investigations and legislative policies. The Dies Committee held hearings to question the loyalty and political affiliations of the Alliance’s leaders and members, especially those from local branches who engaged in mass protest and had interracial memberships.³⁰

“Discrimination, intimidation, terrorization of [WPA] workers for exercising their legal rights to organize is widespread and growing,” wrote WAA national president David Lasser to President Roosevelt in 1940.³¹ By then, international and national events, including the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939, had changed the circumstances for radical activism, and Tenayuca no longer garnered the left-liberal support necessary to overcome the race-baiting and red-baiting thrown at her and the city’s civil liberties and unemployed movements. Both the WPA and WAA had become lightning rods at which the forces of anticommunism and racism fused. In response to the red-baiting, the national WAA shifted away from direct action and local conflicts to a focus

²⁹ “Workers Alliance Formed by Reds, House Group Told,” *Houston Post*, April 18, 1939; Goldberg, *Citizens and Paupers*, 148.

³⁰ Goldberg, *Citizens and Paupers*, 134.

³¹ Goldberg, *Citizens and Paupers*, 129.

on Washington lobbying and negotiations over legislation. Even after it purged known communists from its ranks, however, it still faced federal investigations.

These attacks on WAA conflicted with Tenayuca's commitment to voting rights, free speech, and citizenship rights, but the organization's shift away from rank-and-file led branches and direct action also conflicted with her Popular Frontism. The WAA leadership's decision to abandon collective action and purge radicals from its membership did not save the organization. The CIO national leadership, too, began to purge its radical-led locals and communist members. "It was the Communists who built the CIO, and then were thrown out because of this very narrow type of policy," Tenayuca told an interviewer in 1987.³²

By 1941, local, state, and national anti-New Deal and anticommunist politicians had reasserted their power. This political shift diminished Tenayuca's and Maverick's authority, dismantled the WAA, and undermined the possibilities for collective action. The Texas governor, for instance, had launched a spate of anti-labor laws, including the Anti-Violence Act, which—instead of addressing the widespread vigilante violence and police brutality directed at civil rights and labor activists—made strikers' violence on picket lines against the police and strikebreakers felonies.³³ In July, just a few months before the events of Pearl Harbor drew the U.S. into the war, the FBI added Tenayuca to its list of American citizens who could be detained during a national emergency. The bureau's agents continued to conduct surveillance on her until the 1950s.³⁴

³² Tenayuca, interview by Poyo.

³³ Krochmal, *Blue Texas*, 80.

³⁴ U.S. Department of Justice, Emma Tenayuca Brooks, FBI File no. 64-261.

By the time the United States entered the war, the national WAA was defunct, and its San Antonio Travis Street office—a space central to Tenayuca’s Popular Front visions—had shuttered. As Texas shifted further away from New Deal politics and the West Side’s social movement broke down in response, Maverick’s support for civil liberties and constitutional rights, especially for radicals, meant he could no longer secure the necessary votes to win reelection. At the end of his first and only term in city politics, he lost to former Mayor Quin, re-empowering San Antonio’s racist, anti-radical, anti-civil liberties political machine.³⁵

Without the national WAA and elected liberals like Maverick, it became increasingly difficult for Tenayuca to achieve her Popular Front vision of a place where members of the city’s multiracial working-class could collectively learn how to organize and protect their political and economic rights. Despite the efforts of many WAA activists, New Deal legislation failed to extend full industrial citizenship rights to non-Anglos in San Antonio. Moreover, excising people of color from subsequent workers’ rights movements and New Deal WPA legislation contributed to the still popular image of the working class as white and male that has lasted well into the twenty-first century, with toxic political consequences.³⁶

Scholars claim that the WAA failed for several reasons: violent repression by government and vigilante groups, a working class that was too deeply divided along racial and ethnic lines to maintain solidarity, and the national leadership’s decision to shift its strategy away from direct

³⁵ “Workers Alliance Disbanded in U.S.,” *New York Times*, November 20, 1941.

³⁶ For one critique of labor history’s focus on the male worker, see Jennifer Klein’s review of Jefferson Cowie’s *Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class*. Jennifer Klein, “Apocalypse, Then and Now,” *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas*, (Winter 2011), <https://democracyjournal.org/magazine/19/apocalypse-then-and-now/>, accessed on January 22, 2021. For a critical account of demographic transformations in the twentieth-century U.S. working class, see Gabriel Winant, *The Next Shift: The Fall of Industry and the Rise of Health Care* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021).

action to lobbying for legislation figure prominently in such explanations.³⁷ Yet these accounts make little distinction between such causes, offering no relative judgments about which were more decisive. The San Antonio case indicates that, above all, conservative attacks on citizenship rights and collective action not only undermined the WAA but also cut short Maverick's career in government and Tenayuca's activism in the labor and unemployed movements. These attacks drew power from a vicious symbiosis of racism and anticommunism, aiming to disrupt Popular Front understandings of the New Deal and the kind of society its policies might foster.

The possibilities for the expansion of civil liberties and workers' rights had shrunk on account of both conservative and liberal resistance to the Popular Front movement that Tenayuca and other radicals had built. Liberal leaders and activists had failed to protect dissent, free speech, and collective action in the face of redbaiting and racebaiting, and her career prospects had diminished. "I couldn't obtain a job; I couldn't do anything," she recalled, "None of the unions would have [hired me] although they sought my help when they got out on strike."³⁸ The red-baiting and the difficulties of organizing took a personal and physical toll on her, too. She divorced Homer Brooks in 1941, and, during the Little Red Scare years, local newspapers reported that she had contracted tuberculosis, and suffered a nervous breakdown.³⁹

Her critique of the labor movement was not just personal but political. She suffered dire consequences not only from the anticommunist revanchism of right-wingers, but also from a lack of liberal- and left-institutional support in the face of white supremacy. She had to struggle for

³⁷ See, for example, Rosenzweig, "Organizing the Unemployed," 56; Vargas, *Civil Rights are Labor Rights*, 147.

³⁸ Tenayuca, interview by Poyo, ATC.

³⁹ "Emma Tenayuca Suffers Breakdown," *San Antonio Light*, April 29, 1939; Divorce Certificate, ETP at TWU.

equal treatment and adequate resources *within* CIO unions and other left-led organizations. Years later, she condemned the American labor movement's lack of vision during an oral history interview. "The labor organizations here, the whole labor movement, proceeded to organize on a very narrow economic approach," she told the interviewer, "[I]f labor had accepted the Socialist Party [sic], I think you would still have a large Socialist Party [sic] here."⁴⁰ For Tenayuca, Popular Frontism offered the only path for labor to mount effective anti-racist and socialist politics, without which it would never succeed.

On the streets of San Antonio's West and East Sides, Tenayuca witnessed the limits of federal law, even the New Deal, in the face of anti-labor, anticommunist, and anti-immigrant local and state officials who oversaw WPA resources and the rights of workers and the unemployed. Although the WAA had succeeded in getting jobs on WPA infrastructure worksites for Mexican Americans, the city's poorest areas did not see the road and park upgrades, drainage developments, and other improvement projects benefitting wealthier neighborhoods. The unequal economic development widened the level of access to public services between the city's Anglo and non-Anglo residents. Maverick had touted his ability to secure federal money for economic development, and WAA volunteers ensured non-Anglos access to some WPA jobs, but Tenayuca and San Antonio's radical-led coalition recognized the inadequacy of such victories.

Her organizing and intellectual agenda went far beyond economic rights, mounting a radical and explicit challenge to racism, patriarchy, and ruling class power in politics that had a lasting influence in the city. Blacklisted in the labor movement and without resources from

⁴⁰ Quoted in Rips, "Living History," 14. The *Texas Observer* capitalized Socialist Party when it printed Tenayuca's quote, but it is more likely that she was referring to a broader vision of democratic socialist politics than the Socialist Party of America or its successor, the Socialist Party USA.

Workers Alliance after its collapse, she and other Popular Front organizers in San Antonio struggled to find ways to be politically active throughout the war years.

“I am spiritually, physically, and mentally tired of publicity,” she wrote to a former teacher in December 1942.⁴¹ Hoping to join the war effort, she had applied to the recently established Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps. Not surprisingly given her politics, the military rejected her application. Instead, she went back and forth between San Antonio and Houston, working in different clerical jobs in each city when she could get them. She enrolled in night school at the University of Houston, the Sinclair Business School, and San Antonio Junior College, where she took courses on psychology, history, and creative writing.⁴² She also attended classes at a CPUSA workers school. For the next few years, she organized oil industry workers, and remained on call for any labor leader or striking worker who sought her help. According to the FBI, she served as a CPUSA branch organizer in Houston and hosted Party meetings at her apartment before formally resigning from the Party sometime in the late 1940s.⁴³

Although the CPUSA and the CIO unions demanded support for a no-strike pledge and a shift away from civil rights activism for the duration of the war, not all local activists complied. Tenayuca and other WAA leaders did not just help get Mexican Americans and Black Americans onto the building sites of new housing and tourist attractions in San Antonio, but also trained activists who went on to organize agricultural laborers in the spinach and onion fields in South Texas. These rank-and-file organizers took up both economic and rights issues, fighting

⁴¹ Emma Tenayuca to Miss Marguerite Higgins, December 29, 1942, ETP at TWU.

⁴² “Application Form,” Women’s Army Corp, December 1942, MSS 420, ETP at TWU.

⁴³ U.S. Department of Justice, Emma Tenayuca Brooks, FBI file no. 64-261, González, *Redeeming La Raza*, 163.

simultaneously for increased wages and against segregation and racism. “They desegregated a theatre, asked for classes at school, classes at night to learn English and so forth,” Tenayuca later told interviewers.⁴⁴ Some grassroots Popular Front organizers continued to press for civil rights for Texas’s Mexican and Mexican-American workers throughout the 1940s.

One example of the far-reaching effects of the Alliance’s role as a training ground for organizers is Telesforo Oviedo, an agricultural worker and pecan sheller and one of Tenayuca’s fellow activists.⁴⁵ Oviedo became the President of the Pecan Shellers Union during the strike of 1938, but by 1942, he had moved to Mathis, Texas, to pick spinach and organize the other laborers into a UCAPAWA local.

The UCAPAWA leadership gave him no financial support, but Oviedo still managed to organize the workers, secure resources from the county, and establish a night school to teach English. He also created the first Cinco de Mayo celebration in San Patricio County since 1918 and led a parade whose participants carried both Mexican and American flags. Former WAA members and current Pecan Shellers Union leaders from San Antonio attended the celebration on May 5, 1942, as did Texas Regional Director of UCAPAWA Don Kobler. Although Kobler did not hide his racist condescension, he conceded to being impressed, writing, “in view of the Sinarquista activity and a well-organized Ku Klux Klan in the same county, the advances which the Spanish-speaking people have made there are actually more important than they themselves

⁴⁴ Tenayuca, interview by Poyo, ATC; Tenayuca, interview by Torres. UTSA.

⁴⁵ For more information on Telesforo Oviedo, see Victor Nelson-Cisneros, “UCAPAWA Organizing Activities in Texas, 1930-1950,” *Aztlan* 9 (Spring-Fall, 1978), 74-75. Nelson-Cisneros does not mention Oviedo’s role in Workers Alliance only his organizing with the pecan shellers. He does refer to Oviedo’s successful desegregation of a local theater and the establishment of a night school to teach English.

realize.”⁴⁶ Tenayuca would have realized the significance of these advances, as well as the toll that organizing in the face of violent threats could take on activists.

In spite of everything, renewed civil rights activism was beginning to make some headway in San Antonio again in the postwar period. For instance, Tenayuca and other local organizers succeeded in placing Mexican-American veterans into AFL craft union apprenticeships on the city’s federally funded projects. “With the end of the war and the return of our soldiers,” she later wrote, “we began efforts to get Mexican vets into the craft unions, as apprentice carpenters, bricklayers, welders, etc.”⁴⁷ Moreover, during the 1945 Texas legislature session, a liberal state senator from the city, J. Franklin Spears, proposed a “Good Neighbor” bill to address discrimination against Mexican Americans in the state. He proposed punishments of a \$500 fine and thirty days jail time for Texas business owners who discriminated against Mexican Americans in public spaces. The bill never came up for a vote, and without multiracial and cross-class backing, Tenayuca believed, it was destined to fail. She reaffirmed her conviction in her diary “that only a strong mass movement supported from all sections of the population can bring about provable action by the state legislation.”⁴⁸

Despite a few promising developments, anticommunism and white supremacy within the labor movement continued to limit multiracial organizing and the expansion of civil rights in Texas. At a Texas CIO convention in 1947, a National Maritime Union official named James

⁴⁶ Letter from Don Kobler to Connie Anderson, May 10, 1942, and Press Release for Cinco de Mayo Celebration in Mathis, Food, Tobacco, Agricultural and Allied Workers Union of America, Texas Locals, University of Texas at Arlington. The Sinarquistas were an anticommunist, fascist group started in Mexico.

⁴⁷ Emma Tenayuca to Otto Mullinax, December 11, 1986, Box 4, Folder 35, MSS 420, ETP at TWU. Tenayuca, interview by Poyo, ITC.

⁴⁸ González, *Redeeming La Raza*, 167.

Boyle—who was also a CPUSA member—submitted resolutions to the CIO’s state leadership that supported a federal Anti-lynching Bill and protested the federal government’s loyalty oaths. The CIO’s state executive committee refused to bring the resolutions to the convention floor for a vote.⁴⁹ In Texas and across the country, it was getting increasingly difficult to sustain multiracial mass movements that had broad ambitions for shared community and labor demands. New federal and state anti-labor laws, such as the Labor Management Act of 1947, placed new limits on collective action. The Act prohibited mass picketing, solidarity strikes, and secondary boycotts.

By then, Tenayuca was gone from her hometown. The retrenchment of white supremacy during World War II had left San Antonio’s poorest neighborhoods without a “progressive organization” and her without a public role to play, “not even a minor one in the events of the day.”⁵⁰ The increasing clamor from anticommunists and white supremacists, as well as internal divisions in the unemployed and labor movements, had left her with a decision to make: keep trying to organize in Texas or prepare for a different career elsewhere. She had withstood police harassment, threats of violence, and FBI surveillance, but she could not overcome joblessness. Her professional and educational ambitions—to join the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corp, to work for a CIO union, to complete a college degree—had faced insurmountable obstacles. Anticommunism, discrimination, and poverty narrowed her options down to one: self-exile. Famous, frustrated, and broke, she decided to move to San Francisco, where she could stay with a relative and get some relief from notoriety. Popular Frontism, however, would continue to

⁴⁹ Carleton, *Red Scare!*, 40.

⁵⁰ Tenayuca, July 27, 1944, Diary, Box 2, MSS 420, TWU.

shape her life and activism, even as anticommunism and white supremacy forced her (temporarily) from the public stage.

A Popular Fronter in San Francisco

“San Francisco can best be described by the feeling it produces in the newcomer,” wrote Tenayuca in her diary on January 13, 1947.⁵¹ From a room in her cousin’s house on Rhode Island Street, she could look north all the way to the Russian Hill neighborhood and Fisherman’s Wharf. The buildings “appear as children after a good bath,” she wrote. “The air is fresh. The blue of the sky is reflected in the bay, giving the water a beautiful serene hue of blue.”⁵² Opposite this diary entry, she had copied out stanzas from a poem by Don West, a radical and Workers Alliance activist. The poem, titled “We Hold America,” ends with this line: “to breathe a deep breath / Of hope / We hold the great free Spirit / Of America / in our heart!”⁵³

For the first time in years, Tenayuca was hopeful about the future. She had a home, a clerical job, and walking “the twelve blocks to work [had] become a source of pleasure.”⁵⁴ Within weeks of her arrival she had moved from her cousin’s home to her own room in a boarding house. But these hard-won achievements were precarious: “Life moves rapidly, nay it flows like a stream unevenly and over ragged stone edges meandering along. Sunday I was

⁵¹ Tenayuca, January 13, 1947, Diary, Box 2, MSS 420, ETP at TWU.

⁵² Tenayuca, January 13, 1947, Diary, Box 2, MSS 420, ETP at TWU.

⁵³ Don West published a collection of poems called *Clods of Southern Earth* in 1946. West was an organizer with Workers Alliance in Louisville, Kentucky, and founder of the Highlander Folk School. James J. Lorence, *A Hard Journey: the Life of Don West* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007); Gilmore, *Defying Dixie*, 174-177, 201-204.

⁵⁴ Tenayuca, January 13, 1947, Diary, Box 2, MSS 420, ETP at TWU.

evicted.”⁵⁵ The job was temporary, and she struggled to pay her rent and make ends meet. Still, during her twenty-year exile from her hometown, she attempted to build a politically engaged life and community, with few resources and many challenges.

Although sporadic employment and a series of boarding house rooms marked her first lonesome months in San Francisco, she had begun to recover from the previous years’ difficulties, which had left her depressed, fatigued, and close to a breakdown. “For a number of months my interests in everything stopped,” she confessed to her diary. “I had no desire to live.”⁵⁶ In her new city, however, she consulted a doctor regularly to help with her insomnia and depression, and began venturing out to see San Francisco’s cultural and political life and its nearby scenic coastline.

Tenayuca turned her keen analytical mind and Popular Front theories to her new surroundings and made new friends, an act that she likened to “opening a window in a stuffy room.”⁵⁷ She attended lectures at the California Labor School (CLS) and sought out radicals, such as Paul Robeson and Harry Bridges, who came to the city on speaking tours. Founded in 1942, the CLS offered a selection of courses that included sessions on labor, Black, and women’s history, art and drama, and economics. It also provided classes on practical subjects for grassroots and rank-and-file organizers, such as organizing strategies and how to produce a union or community newspaper.⁵⁸ Labor unions, such as Bridges’s International Longshoremen’s and

⁵⁵ Tenayuca, April 4, 1947, Diary, Box 2, MSS 420, ETP at TWU.

⁵⁶ Tenayuca, Feb 5, 1947, Diary, Box 2, MSS 420, ETP at TWU.

⁵⁷ Tenayuca, January 28, 1947, Feb 22, 1948, August 28, 1947, Diary, Box 2, MSS 420, ETP at TWU.

⁵⁸ For more on the CLS, see Gettleman, “The Lost World of United States Labor Education,” 205-215.

Warehousemen's Union (ILWU), and progressive and civil rights organizations funded the school in San Francisco and its offshoot in Los Angeles, the People's Educational Center.

By the time she arrived in San Francisco, the CLS, like Tenayuca herself, was on the government's list of subversives. The Subversive Activities Control Board forced the CLS to close in the mid-1950s, shutting off access to affordable education for her and other working-class intellectuals. But while it was open, the school sponsored events and speakers that inspired her. Robeson's speech and songs caused her to pick up her diary and write again after months of silence. "And tonight I realized one of the privileges of being in a city like San Francisco," she wrote in August 1947, is that "I heard Harry Bridges address a memorial meeting." She had wanted to meet Bridges since 1934, when as a teenager she had sent a donation to the striking longshore workers in San Francisco. Ever the attentive critic, she continued, Bridges "succeeded in delivering a good speech, but not the best speech of the evening." Approaching him after the program, she "was nervously bubbling with enthusiasm," but found that it "was an anti-climax to the long waiting to hear Harry Bridges speak." She was eager to talk, but he failed to recognize her as the young woman who had led thousands in demonstrations and on picket lines in San Antonio, and treated her dismissively.⁵⁹

She attended events sponsored by Progressive Citizens of America in support of Henry Wallace's presidential campaign in 1948, and planned to vote for him on Election Day.⁶⁰ Yet she also criticized the CPUSA—in her diary if not in public—for not fighting back sufficiently against red-baiting and for not effectively educating the workers in trade unions about

⁵⁹ Tenayuca, August 28, 1947, Diary, Box 2, MSS 420, ETP at TWU.

⁶⁰ Tenayuca, June 20, 1948, Diary, Box 2, MSS 420, ETP at TWU.

socialism.⁶¹ She walked no picket lines and accompanied no delegations to San Francisco's City Hall, but, despite her critiques of its main institutions, neither did she forsake her beliefs in radical trade unionism and Popular Front coalition politics.

Just as when she was a teenager in the Who-Gives-A-Damn Club, she looked to novels, films, poetry and other cultural forms for inspiration for her own nascent writing, and for lenses through which to examine the political moment in which she was living. She enrolled in college courses when she had the money for tuition, but even when she did not have the means, she continued to train her eye and intellect on the books and movies she consumed in her free time, filling her diary with astute interpretations. John Steinbeck, she observed, "demonstrates a contempt for humanity" in *Tortilla Flats*; Charlie Chaplin's satirical message about the "irony and tragedy of attempting individual solutions to social and economic problems" is lost in the pessimism of *Monsieur Verdoux*.⁶² Jack London, whom she recognized as a kindred spirit, shared her "erratic temperament, the same tendency to drive myself." One lesson she claimed to have learned from London's life was the need to "gaze upon fellow human beings as my brothers and sisters and I shall not be disillusioned when they fail me."⁶³

Alienated from her clerical wage work and denied a career in the labor movement, Tenayuca did not abandon her politics. Her old ideas and ambitions to have a voice survived. "I must find a means of expressing myself," she recorded in her diary, "I must write."⁶⁴ Snippets of poems, sketches of short stories, and outlines of a novel: all appear in her diary, but she never

⁶¹ Tenayuca, August 15, 1949, Diary, Box 2, MSS 420, ETP at TWU.

⁶² Tenayuca, April 22, 1949, October 19, 1947, Diary, Box 2, MSS 420, ETP at TWU.

⁶³ Tenayuca, August 2, 1948, Diary, Box 2, MSS 420, ETP at TWU.

⁶⁴ Tenayuca, July 14, 1948, Diary, Box 2, MSS 420, ETP at TWU.

published (and perhaps never finished) any original work other than “The Mexican Question.” Themes of alienation, oppression, and the difficulties of building solidarity across race, class, and gender lines provided the seeds of her storylines: in one outline, for example, a disaffected office girl with a tyrannical boss is “isolated in her misery. Of course, the real answer to such a problem would be the organization of a union, but Miss S. has always felt above the working man.”⁶⁵

She daydreamed about writing a novel (autobiographical but with a gender switch) that would tell the story of Alberto Vasquez Gomez, a Mexican-American Texan. “For one hell of long time I have been thinking about a novel about Texas Mexicans,” she confided to her diary. “At work, at home, and in bed I have thought about it. I have written whole chapters of it in my mind.”⁶⁶ Unfortunately, the pressures of finding employment and, after the birth of her son, supporting herself and her child prevented these imagined chapters from appearing on the page or in print.

On occasion Tenayuca wrote letters home to her family, describing her difficulties in California. “I wrote M and told her I was depressed and bemoaned the fact that I didn’t finish my education so consequently I am stuck in an office,” Tenayuca reported in a diary entry in 1948. “And indeed I find the work most unbearable at times.”⁶⁷

In 1949, she passed the entrance exam for San Francisco State College (SFSC), which was originally a teacher training school. She enrolled that fall. For the next few years, she

⁶⁵ Tenayuca, January 25, 1947, Diary, Box 2, MSS 420, ETP at TWU.

⁶⁶ Tenayuca, November 26, 1947, Diary, Box 2, MSS 420, ETP at TWU. According to notes in her diary, this novel would have been based on her life but the central figure, Alberto Vasquez Gomez, would be a man.

⁶⁷ Tenayuca, July 14, 1948, Diary, Box 2, MSS 420, ETP at TWU.

juggled a full-time job with a course load of three or four classes per semester at SFSC. By the end of the fall term in 1951, she was earning good grades—an A in Spanish American Literature, a B in the History of Russia—and was only a few credits from graduating.⁶⁸ She was also pregnant.

In August 1952, two months after she had earned her long-desired college degree, Tenayuca and George Dixon Adams had a son, whom she officially named Francisco after her grandfather, but nicknamed Pancho/Frank.⁶⁹ She left little evidence about her relationship with Frank's father. One of her brief diary entries from 1950 describes a "black bearded Adams with the beautifully shaped head, the nice long forehead and the fine hair line." It continues, "He may have much of the snob in him but he is genuine and human."⁷⁰ On the day of Frank's birth, Adams sent the following telegram addressed to his new son: "Give as Many Hearty Cries as You wish Francisco, for you and the innumerable happy legions of youth who will rebuild this world."⁷¹ He makes no more appearances in Tenayuca's diary.

By June 1953, she had finally secured a stable job—as a stenographer for an Ingersoll-Rand business—but her dreams of finishing her education and becoming a teacher still eluded her. Over the next few years, her diary entries became more sporadic as she dealt with difficulties of single parenthood, night school, and a boring job. "My frustrations seem to have

⁶⁸ SFSC transcript, Box 7, Folder 14, MSS 420, ETP at TWU.

⁶⁹ Telegram from George Dixon Adams, Box 2, Folder 1, MSS 420, ETP at TWU.

⁷⁰ Tenayuca, February 4, 1950, Diary, Box 2, MSS 420, ETP at TWU.

⁷¹ Telegram from George Dixon Adams, Box 2, Folder 1, MSS 420, ETP at TWU.

hit a new high,” she wrote in 1957. “My plans for teaching are at a standstill. Work at the office has been most trying.”⁷²

Tenayuca raised Frank alone until 1962, when he turned ten and entered St. Vincent’s School for Boys. From the school in San Rafael, about 40 miles north of San Francisco, Frank wrote to her regularly for the next five years, often sending greetings to her various friends and roommates and reporting on his grades. Ever the educator, she would correct his grammar and return his letters with the mistakes fixed in red pen alongside his pocket money.⁷³ In 1967, he left St. Vincent’s and moved to San Antonio to stay with his maternal relatives, but his letters continued. “Good luck in finding a steady job,” he wrote to her that summer.⁷⁴

Back in San Francisco, Tenayuca, despite her college degree and decade-long work experience at Ingersoll-Rand, struggled to find work that matched her talents and intellect. She was, however, determined to achieve her dream of becoming a teacher. Surprisingly, perhaps, she would find that opportunity back home where, as she came to realize, she had done a lot of teaching already.

Popular Front Legacies in San Antonio

In 1968, Tenayuca moved permanently back to San Antonio, following sixteen-year-old Frank and reuniting with her family. Thirty years before this prodigal return, she and other WAA leaders had trained numerous San Antonian activists how to challenge authorities, build

⁷² Tenayuca, May 12, 1957, Diary, Box 2, MSS 420, ETP at TWU. In a number of entries, Tenayuca mentions her connection to Alcoholics Anonymous.

⁷³ For correspondence between Tenayuca and her son, see Box 2, Files 1-4, MSS 420, ETP at TWU. Her papers do not have any evidence that explain why her son resided at St. Vincent’s.

⁷⁴ Frank Adams to Emma Tenayuca, August 26, 1967, ETP at TWU.

alliances, and inspire others to join them on picket lines and at mass demonstrations. White supremacy, anticommunism, and economic sanctions had limited her career opportunities, and forced her to remake her life thousands of miles away from her family, friends, and political comrades. Her vision of a hall on the West Side—where Mexicans and Mexican Americans had access to free education (political, bilingual, and otherwise), and where activists from left-liberal organizations could meet to strategize—had dimmed in her absence. But it had not died altogether.

While she was rebuilding her life in California, grassroots left and liberal activists in the city had made some strides toward civil and labor rights through electoral politics and picket lines. Building on the Popular Front’s foundation, San Antonio activists saw new multiracial coalitions develop in the 1950s, but with more focus on electoral politics and legislation as solutions for discrimination than on mass protest in solidarity with labor unions.⁷⁵ The racist, anticommunist Democratic political establishment that had forced Tenayuca into exile had not eradicated the political dreams and ambitions of San Antonio’s working-class and communities of color, but had reoriented them.

Tenayuca’s reappearance in the public sphere in the 1970s coincided with renewed organizing among Texas agricultural workers and civil rights activists, particularly in the Mexican-American civil rights movement. She now personified the San Antonio pecan shellers’ strike, and quickly became famous again. With her communism largely forgotten or downplayed by historians and local journalists who celebrated her legacy, she acquired a very different reputation than that of her “Red Chief” moniker in the 1930s.

⁷⁵ Krochmal, *Blue Texas*, 50.

This alteration of her reputation reflected the shift in political tenor among left-liberal San Antonians. With Tenayuca and other Popular Fronters marginalized or out of the picture, their focus had become more liberal than left, more local than transnational, and more focused on integration than on self-determination. Yet by mobilizing Mexican and Mexican-American communities in San Antonio, Tenayuca had helped create the political imaginary and train the leaders that made these later political successes possible. When she returned to San Antonio, what really surprised her, she later wrote to a friend, “was that during my absence, with the development of the Chicano Movement, I had become some kind of heroine. Believe me, this was something I never dreamed of during my starving days as an organizer.”⁷⁶

A series of firsts in local and state elections illustrate the continuation of movements for civil rights and social reform in the postwar period, but with decidedly liberal rather than radical priorities. The year after Tenayuca had decamped for California, two Popular Front activists—one Black, one Mexican-American—had combined campaigns to win elections to two of the city’s all-Anglo local school boards.⁷⁷ In 1952, a small group of Mexican-American labor and community activists formed the self-named “Loyal American Democrats” to secure local Democratic Party precinct positions. A year later, Democrat Henry B. González, who was from a middle-class family with elite roots in Mexico and had competed against Tenayuca in high school debate contests, won a seat on the City Council.⁷⁸ In 1960, he became the first Mexican American elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, replacing Congressman Paul Kilday,

⁷⁶ Emma Tenuca to Otto Mullinax, December 11, 1986, Box 4, MSS 420, ETP at TWU.

⁷⁷ Krochmal, *Blue Texas*, 133.

⁷⁸ For more on Henry González, see David Montejano, *Quixote’s Soldiers: A Local History of the Chicano Movement, 1966-1981* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010).

who had held the seat since defeating Maury Maverick in 1938. A number of Black American and Mexican-American activists worked together in a multiracial alliance to support González's election campaigns, part of the longer struggle against Jim Crow policies in San Antonio.⁷⁹

The legacy of Popular Front politics and organizing also lived on in San Antonio's labor movement, but so did the tensions over nationally directed campaign strategies and support for grassroots leadership. Tenayuca's experiences with national labor leaders in the 1930s and 1940s reproduced themselves for local labor activists in fights for resources from their international unions.

In 1959, a walkout at the city's Tex-Son garment factory marked the first International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) strike led by a Mexican-American woman, Sophia Gonzalez.⁸⁰ The mostly Mexican-American strikers defied state and federal anti-labor laws against secondary boycotts and mass picketing and built strong community support, in what became a four-year battle. Labor activist and socialist George Lambert, who had worked closely with Tenayuca in the late 1930s, helped lead the ILGWU's Tex-Son local's organizing and negotiations during the strike and boycott, as he had for the pecan shellers' UCAPAWA local almost twenty years earlier. Lambert and local organizers prioritized women's rank-and-file leadership as a key strategy in the Tex-Son organizing campaign.⁸¹ The Tex-Son strike and boycott garnered support from Mexico's Confederacion de Trabajadores de Mexico (CTM) and, unlike during the pecan shellers' uprising, some of San Antonio's AFL locals.

⁷⁹ Krochmal, *Blue Texas*, 153.

⁸⁰ Lori A. Flores, "An Unladylike Strike Fashionably Clothed: Mexicana and Anglo Women Garment Workers Against Tex-Son, 1959-1963," *Pacific Historical Review* 78, no. 3 (August 2009), 368.

⁸¹ Krochmal, *Blue Texas*, 180.

Despite community support and the successful boycott, however, the ILGWU's national president David Dubinsky, an anticommunist whom Tenayuca had criticized for not supporting local rank-and-file leadership during the 1930s, cut strike benefits twenty-one months after the strike's start, claiming it was a losing battle.⁸² A core group of strikers continued to picket the Tex-Son factory until it closed two years later. Although the strike ultimately failed, it illustrates the ongoing formations of grassroots Popular Front-style organizing strategies and political visions in the city.

In the early 1970s, two new organizing campaigns began in San Antonio: an Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA) union recognition drive at the Farah Clothing manufacturer, and the launch of Communities Organizing for Public Service (COPS), a grassroots organization that mobilized for economic development and political representation for the city's working-class communities. While Tenayuca did not actively volunteer in either of these campaigns, she did support them. The campaigns each illustrate both the legacy and the unfinished business of her Popular Front organizing.⁸³

On Labor Day in 1972, several hundred San Antonians attended an outdoor mass at Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Catholic church where Tenayuca worshipped daily, to support Chicano/a workers on strike at the city's Farah clothing factories, as well as the United Farm Workers (UFW) lettuce boycott. While she was not politically active at the time, Tenayuca donated to the

⁸² Krochmal, *Blue Texas*, 181-192; Flores, "An Unladylike Strike."

⁸³ For more on social movements in San Antonio during the 1970s, see Krochmal, *Blue Texas*, 406-407; Montejano, *Quixote's Soldiers*, 237-262. Montejano examines the student and youth movements and the liberal political establishment's efforts to undermine them. He pays particular attention to women's leadership in COPS.

Farah workers' strike fund as part of her church activities.⁸⁴ She was not alone in her support. A national AFL-CIO leader gave the guest sermon, "Solidarity and Sacrifice with the Farm Worker."⁸⁵

A few months earlier, in the midst of an organizing campaign to win union recognition for the ACWA at Farah, four hundred workers had started a walkout at one of the company's two San Antonio factories after management fired three union activists.⁸⁶ The walkout took the ACWA's national leadership by surprise. "When the word came that they were walking out at the San Antonio plant we were astonished," one ACWA official told the *New York Times*. "We figured it would last two or three days and then they would quietly go back. Historically the Mexican-American community hasn't been cohesive enough to sustain this kind of strike."⁸⁷ San Antonio's history of militant grassroots union and community organizing—including that of ACWA's own organizers George and Latane Lambert—had clearly faded from memory, with real consequences for the labor movement.⁸⁸

After the strike spread to Farah's other plants in the Southwest, the ACWA filed unfair labor practices charges with the NLRB, and launched a national boycott, calling on AFL-CIO

⁸⁴ Tenayuca, interview by Turner.

⁸⁵ "Labor Issues to Key Mass, *San Antonio Express*, September 4, 1972; David Shute, "Labor Day Celebration of Hope," *San Antonio Express*, September 5, 1972.

⁸⁶ Nell Fenner Grover, "Farah Workers Striking," *San Antonio Express*, May 5, 1972; Grover, "Unionists Address Strikers," *San Antonio Express*, May 12, 1972; Grover, "Pickets at Stores Hit Farah," *San Antonio Express*, May 25, 1972; Grover, "Bishop, Big Labor Back Farah Strike," *San Antonio Express*, July 20, 1972.

⁸⁷ Philip Shabecoff, "Farah Strike Has Become War of Attrition," *New York Times*, June 16, 1973.

⁸⁸ Krochmal, *Blue Texas*, 177-179. The Lamberts worked on-and-off for the ACWA in Texas from 1938 to 1951.

unions and other supporters to set up picket lines at department stores that sold Farah products.⁸⁹ The strike and boycott gained attention from politicians, religious leaders, and women's groups nationwide. Senator George McGovern, who was then running for president, publicly announced his backing, as did the head of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. At the National Women's Political Caucus's first convention, held in Houston in February 1973, convention members sponsored a "Women's March" and picket line in solidarity outside one of the city's department stores. In July, the American Postal Workers Union, which had recently won recognition after a bitter strike, picketed a department store in New Orleans during its annual convention.⁹⁰ Meanwhile, the regional NLRB sided with the union in one case and with Farah in another, leaving neither with an advantage.

With ACWA prioritizing NLRB hearings and the national boycott, the organizing drive in San Antonio fell apart. In August 1973, one week before a scheduled NLRB election, the union withdrew its demand for recognition for the San Antonio workers.⁹¹ While the strike continued at Farah's other plants in Texas and New Mexico, the company permanently closed its two factories in San Antonio. "You get this every time there is a strike here," Tenayuca later told an interviewer, "they won't let the organizers really organize because one of the things they are going to put an end to is very low paying jobs and cheap labor."⁹² Although she aimed her

⁸⁹ For more on this strike, see Emily Honig, "Women at Farah Revisited: Political Mobilization and its Aftermath Among Chicana Workers at El Paso, Texas, 1972-1992," *Feminist Studies* 22, no. 2 (Summer 1996), 425-452; Vicki Ruiz, *From Out of the Shadows*. Honig only briefly mentions the San Antonio strikes, as her oral histories of strikers were all from El Paso.

⁹⁰ "Women's March Endorses Farah Workers' Strike," *San Antonio Express*, February 11, 1973; "Bishop, Big Labor Back Farah Strike," *San Antonio Express*, July 20, 1972.

⁹¹ Nell Fenner Grover, "Union Yields on Farah," *San Antonio Express*, August 25, 1973.

⁹² Tenayuca, interview by Turner, UTAustin.

criticism at the local pro-business, anti-labor city leaders, it could just as easily have been a condemnation of the ACWA's failure to capitalize on grassroots organizing strategies and militancy in San Antonio. There is little evidence of the union's support for—or even awareness of—the type of labor-community coalitions, rank-and-file leadership development, and door-to-door organizing that Tenayuca and WAA engaged in during the 1930s.

In 1973, fellow San Antonian Ernesto Cortés, a Saul Alinsky protégé, formed COPS, a grassroots-led organization intended to empower the city's West Side working-class communities through electoral politics and direct action.⁹³ Institutional backing from the Catholic diocese gave Cortés access to local parish activists, many of whom were Mexican-American women. “I had a woman recently come up to me—she's a member of COPS now—and her father was a member of the Workers Alliance,” Tenayuca recounted to an interviewer in the 1980s.⁹⁴ Cortés was tapping into a seam of organizing passed on by previous generations. By recruiting and training these neighborhood leaders, Cortés and a team of local organizers registered thousands of new voters, and backed City Council campaigns for a number of Hispanic and African-American candidates.⁹⁵

⁹³ For an analysis of Saul Alinsky's organizing model and strategies on the contemporary labor movement, see McAlevey, “The Crisis of New Labor and Alinsky's Legacy,” 415-441. McAlevey criticizes the Alinsky model for its top-down approach, reliance on corporate campaigns or secondary boycotts, and neglect of grassroots workplace organizing. She compares this model to CIO- and communist-influenced organizing that is instead focused on the “role of workers in their own emancipation” and on workers as embedded in workplace and community networks.

⁹⁴ Rips, “Living History,” 10.

⁹⁵ For more on COPS and Ernesto Cortés, see Ernesto Cortés, “San Antonio's COPS: Changing the Locus of Political Decision Making,” *Christianity & Crisis* 47, no. 1 (February 2, 1987), 18-22; Mary Beth Rogers, *Cold Anger: A Story of Faith and Power Politics* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1990); Montejano, *Quixote's Soldiers*, 248-250.

Building local coalitions between members of churches, labor unions, and community organizations, such as Parent-Teacher Associations, COPS activists engaged in battles over the city's resources and budget decisions. Women did the lion's share of the grassroots organizing: recruiting new members and registering new voters, turning out their neighbors and fellow parishioners to actions and political meetings, reading the fine print of city budgets and development plans, and devising direct actions. Five of the six COPS presidents in its first decade were women. Demanding that their communities and neighborhoods benefit equally from city and federal funding, COPS members advocated for more libraries, capital improvements for schools, and a voice in economic development plans. Known for their creative direct actions, COPS protestors disrupted city council meetings and local bank activities with songs and skits.⁹⁶

By 1977, six COPS-backed candidates—five Hispanic and one African-American—had won election to the City Council, giving the West Side's working-class community more local political support in its efforts to secure millions of dollars for badly needed infrastructure improvements and economic development in San Antonio's poorest neighborhoods. In the 1930s, Maury Maverick and Tenayuca had similarly successfully demanded federal dollars for the city's economic development, and resources for its poorest neighborhoods. The New Deal's resources ultimately, however, had not benefited the West Side, and had instead increased inequality between the city's neighborhoods. The COPS activists were reviving the Popular Front's unrealized ambitions.

Some local activists pointed to Tenayuca's previous organizing as an inspiration for San Antonio's women to become active in COPS. "I was given credit for this starting here, COPS,"

⁹⁶ For newspaper coverage and materials, see the COPS / Metro Alliance Records, MS346, Special Collections, UTSA.

she once told a group of union members.⁹⁷ She was particularly impressed with COPS, and its commitments to local women's leadership and just allocations of public resources. "It's the women—I mean the COPS women—it's the women who have led, and I just have a feeling, a very strong feeling, that if ever this world is civilized that it would be more the work of women."⁹⁸ Perhaps she saw in this coalition an echo of her own argument in "The Mexican Question" about connections between political representation and economic development.

Although Tenayuca never again led an organization or a movement after her return to San Antonio, she did provide a vital community service as a bilingual teacher in the city's school system. Over the ensuing decades, city officials hired her as an elementary school teacher, which finally provided her with (mostly) secure employment and a steady career. She found herself a local celebrity once again, as articles on the pecan strike and her labor activism began appearing in local newspapers.⁹⁹ In some ways, her second bout with fame gave her additional spaces to teach, or at least to provide a political education. She corresponded with radical college students and other activists, and gave a number of oral histories and interviews to journalists and academics—often attempting to shape the historical record by stressing the importance of Workers Alliance in the pecan strike. Finally, she again had a public platform to espouse her Popular Frontism, especially her commitment to bilingual education and the contributions of Mexican Americans to American culture and history. Her vision for a Popular Front politics that

⁹⁷ Tenayuca, Speech to Newspaper Guild, ATC.

⁹⁸ Tenayuca, interview by Poyo, ATC.

⁹⁹ See for example, Rips, "Living History;" Jan Jarboe, "S.A.'s Linen Needs Airing," *San Antonio Light*, March 3, 1985; Turner, "A Night That Changed Lives, San Antonio;" Jeannie Keever, "La Pasionaria Still Speaks Out for Justice," *San Antonio Light*, March 8, 1988; Marina Pisano, "Labor Leader's Legacy Endures: Former Union Organizer Living a Quiet Life—Sort Of," *San Antonio Express-News*, February 1, 1990.

protected civil liberties and labor rights remained vivid, as a new generation of civil rights and labor activists discovered in the 1970s and 1980s when they interviewed her about the pecan-shellers' strike.

Tenayuca did not completely abandon political activism. In the 1980s, despite a demanding job as a teacher, ill health, and a number of family crises, she volunteered for the Texas Women's Political Caucus and a number of local and statewide Democratic campaigns, walking "the streets of my neighborhood registering voters," and earning accolades from the state's Democratic political apparatus.¹⁰⁰

By then, San Antonio's liberal political establishment had fully welcomed Tenayuca home, celebrating her legendary activism and her contribution to Texas women's history.¹⁰¹ In 1984, she received her first nomination for the city's Hall of Fame, although she was not inducted until 1991. In 1988, Texas Governor Ann Richards and Comptroller Bob Bullock each wrote to her to express admiration for her past activism. "You have meant so much to the history of women in this state and I am proud that you are my friend," wrote Richards, while Bullock penned, "Your know-how and political savvy are now legend."¹⁰² In 1990, the National Women's History Project's honored Tenayuca and her union activism in a poster, "Courageous

¹⁰⁰ Emma Tenayuca to Morris Dees, December 6, 1988, Box 4, MSS 420, ETP at TWU; Jeannie Kever, "La Pasionera still speaks out for justice," *San Antonio Light*, March 8, 1988.

¹⁰¹ Ann Richards to Emma Tenayuca, January 28, 1988, Box 5, Folder 14, MSS 420, ETP at TWU; Bob Bullock to Emma Tenayuca, August 3, 1988, Box 2, Folder 14, MSS 420, ETP at TWU.

¹⁰² Ann Richards to Emma Tenayuca, January 28, 1988, Box 4, MSS 420, ETP at TWU; Letter to Emma Tenayuca from Bob Bullock, August 3, 1988, Box 4, MSS 420, ETP at TWU.

Voices Echoing in Our Lives,” that described her as a “tenacious labor organizer,” and placed her alongside such luminaries as Sojourner Truth, Rachel Carson, and Ella Baker.¹⁰³

Liberal Recoveries and Erasures

Well into her seventies, Tenayuca continued to be a person who could not “view the present conditions with apathy or indifference,” as she had written in 1944. But the public awards and praise she received in later life often had the effect of encasing her in amber as a 1930s political actor, reframing her past to fit liberal preconceptions while pre-empting her ongoing radicalism. While she told interviewers and journalists that she valued her privacy and had no ambitions to become a public figure again, she also expressed annoyance at the single-mindedness of the questions they posed about her role in the pecan strike. “I have often felt frustrated,” she wrote to a friend in 1985, “because my desire has been to talk about the situation in Nicaragua, El Salvador, the great danger of Nuclear War.”¹⁰⁴ As well-read and informed about the events of the day as ever, she chaffed against interviewers who were more interested in her memories of the past than in her thoughts about the future.

Cold War liberalism and anticommunism distorted narratives of Tenayuca’s radicalism and political commitments. “Maligned in youth and respected in old age,” is how Julia Kirk Blackwelder summarizes Tenayuca’s trajectory from disgraced communist to celebrated civil rights heroine. Her “vision and courage gradually overshadowed her radicalism in the memories

¹⁰³ “S.A. Labor Organizer on Poster,” *Sunday Express-News*, February 25, 1990.

¹⁰⁴ Tenayuca to Julia (last name unknown), December 24, 1985, Box 4, MSS 420, ETP at TWU.

of the residents of San Antonio,” Blackwelder writes.¹⁰⁵ Yet this mistakes the cause and timing of Tenayuca’s reputational transformation.

For several years in the 1930s, she had enjoyed grudging respect from local newspapers and explicit support from liberal organizations for her activism. Journalists had applauded her oratorical skills, and depicted her as a quasi-religious figure with a dedicated following.¹⁰⁶ While she was indeed visionary and courageous, what erased her radicalism from public discourse was a persistent and virulent anticommunism that intensified in the late 1930s. She faced an anticommunism that encompassed both white supremacists’ threats of violence against the grassroots Popular Front, and liberals’ failures to protect free speech and workers’ rights from such attacks. The anticommunism of both the right and liberal-left drove her to California at the mid-century, then sanitized her radicalism at century’s end.

A number of historians have restored Tenayuca to the annals of the early civil rights movement in Texas, detailing her challenges to San Antonio’s Jim Crow political structure in the 1930s.¹⁰⁷ These historians rightfully place her at the center of the city’s Popular Front coalition during the Great Depression. Yet in describing her as an exceptional individual with a deep commitment to Mexican-American civil and labor rights and the plight of the poor in San Antonio, they have failed to acknowledge the radical network around her. Their accounts have consequently produced a historiographical echo of the anticommunism that drove her into exile.

Such accounts obscure the depths of Tenayuca’s radicalism with liberal bromides, claiming that she joined the CPUSA solely because it was the only organization actively working

¹⁰⁵ Blackwelder, “Emma Tenayuca,” 192.

¹⁰⁶ See “Emma and her Disciples,” *San Antonio Light*, July 14, 1937.

¹⁰⁷ Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*; Krochmal, *Blue Texas*; González, *Redeeming La Raza*.

for civil and labor rights in San Antonio. She did not “hoist the Red Flag above the daily campaign to organize and assist the unemployed and underemployed,” Blackwelder has argued.¹⁰⁸ Playing down Tenayuca’s communism, Gabriela González asserts that she placed her “faith in New Deal liberalism” and called for “reform rather than revolution.”¹⁰⁹ She became a communist, claims Max Krochmal, “not out of adherence to party dogma, but rather because it was the only group in the state that supported improvements in the civil rights and working conditions of ordinary *mexicanos*.”¹¹⁰

In efforts to soften Tenayuca’s intellectual and ideological commitments, such historians instead find the source of her activism in her emotional reaction to the poverty, racism, and injustice she witnessed in San Antonio. “The impassioned crusader’s motivations were bound less by propagandizing Marxist ideology,” writes Vargas, “than by a strong attachment to her working-class community, whose miserable plight saddened and angered her.”¹¹¹ This common narrative—she was a temporary not a true radical, an activist of affect not intellect—serves to separate her from her radical politics, while maintaining her commitment to labor and civil rights activism.

Moreover, it diminishes the collective power of the movement she helped to build. The shared assumption that Tenayuca’s connection to the CPUSA and the Soviet Union isolated her from the (non-revolutionary) working-class cannot be reconciled with the network of radical leaders in San Antonio, or the influence of Mexican history and radical politics on San Antonio’s

¹⁰⁸ Blackwelder, “Emma Tenayuca: Vision and Courage,” 201.

¹⁰⁹ González, *Redeeming La Raza*, 151, 165.

¹¹⁰ Krochmal, *Blue Texas*, 23.

¹¹¹ Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 123.

Popular Fronters, liberals, and conservatives. Blackwelder depicts Tenayuca as “the single figure in San Antonio in the 1930s who could mobilize the West Side,” but it would be truer to say she was merely the most famous in a network of radical and progressive activists in the city.¹¹² Krochmal compounds this denial of more widespread radicalism, claiming that San Antonio’s working-class “overlooked the Red Menace and flocked to the fight against the racial division of labor and the poverty it produced.”¹¹³ Similarly, Vargas asserts that, “San Antonio’s citizens pushed back the red tide of communism.”¹¹⁴ The misapprehension of Tenayuca’s CPUSA membership as deviant or incidental to her radicalism erases the role of communism, socialism, and anarchism not just in her political ideology, but also in Texas’s movements for economic and racial justice.

It is telling that these celebrations of her Depression-era accomplishments end with the anticommunist riot and Hitler-Stalin Pact of 1939, both of which they claim drove her from the public sphere. Scholars claim that her appearance at the CPUSA convention ended her political career, and they often lay blame for the riot on her communist husband’s dogmatic decision, against her wishes, to hold the meeting at the Municipal Auditorium.¹¹⁵ This analysis shifts responsibility away from the rioters and the Jim Crow political machine that mobilized against her and other civil liberties activists at a moment when the machine’s power was most under threat. It identifies the red-baiting, but fails to link it to the race-baiting, and, in effect, blames

¹¹² Blackwelder, “Emma Tenayuca,” 207.

¹¹³ Krochmal, *Blue Texas*, 28.

¹¹⁴ Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 146.

¹¹⁵ Vargas, “Tejana Radical,” 578.

communism for her subsequent hardship rather than crediting it for her previous success and subsequent legacy.

These historians share the notion that Tenayuca's "fate was inextricably tied to national Communist Party policy" and to the Soviet Union, although they disagree about when, definitively, she resigned from the Communist Party.¹¹⁶ Some argue that she became disillusioned with the Communist Party after the Hitler-Stalin Pact, especially as one of her brothers was serving in the U.S. Army. As Vargas writes, "The Tejana learned the hard lesson that Marxist doctrine and unwavering allegiance to party principles counted more to the party than promoting the welfare of Mexican workers."¹¹⁷ Others cite her FBI report, which provides a statement that she resigned her membership in 1948.¹¹⁸

No matter the date or the reason they posit, scholars concur that her communism led to a tragic downfall. "The loss of idealism and energy of Tenayuca's generation was lamentable," writes one historian, "Had it been spent in a better cause it might have saved the world and the nation much misery."¹¹⁹ Ending her narrative in the early 1940s truncates her political life, leading one historian to claim mistakenly that she then had to "restart her life as a humble laborer."¹²⁰ In these narratives, her later political volunteering, long teaching career, and support for socialism, which she articulated throughout the 1980s and 1990s, simply disappear.

¹¹⁶ Vargas, *Labor Rights are Civil Rights*, 146.

¹¹⁷ Vargas, "Tejana Radical," 579.

¹¹⁸ U.S. Department of Justice, Emma Tenayuca Brook, FBI file no. 64-261; González, *Redeeming La Raza*.

¹¹⁹ Richard Buitron, *The Quest for Tejano Identity in San Antonio, Texas, 1913-2000* (New York: Routledge Press, 2004), 41.

¹²⁰ Krochmal, *Blue Texas*, 54.

The later accolades for Tenayuca's civil rights activism during the pecan shellers strike have obscured her Popular Front vision of a multiracial, transnational working-class. When latter-day liberals have embraced her legacy fighting for Mexican-American civil and workers' rights in the 1930s without acknowledging her consistent and lifelong radicalism, they have repeated the sins of their anticommunist liberal forebears. They have refused to confront the historical limits of such liberalism in the face of right-wing violence against radicals and communities of color. In a way, this sanitized version of her history replicates the violence that destroyed her promising organizing career. While right-wingers exiled her from San Antonio, liberal accolades exile the heart of her Popular Frontism from public memory.

This erasure is exemplified on a memorial plaque that the Texas Historical Commission erected in Tenayuca's honor in San Antonio's Milam Park (formerly Plaza del Zacate) in 2009. On the marker, the Commission claims that Tenayuca joined "activist political organizations because of their philosophy in favor of workers' rights" and that the pecan strike was "one of the first successful actions in the Mexican-American struggle for political and social justice."¹²¹ There is no mention of Tenayuca's radical political philosophies, her membership in the Communist Party, her admiration of the IWW and Mexico's radicals, or her organizing on behalf of the unemployed.

Tenayuca reciprocated the liberal establishment's esteem, but with a caveat: "I continue to have the greatest admiration for the *consistent* liberal. Those who have had an abiding faith in our constitution, and have fought for civil rights, for freedom of speech, for labor's right to

¹²¹ Texas Historical Commission Plaque, Milam Square, San Antonio, Texas. Photograph in author's possession.

organize.”¹²² For those who did not fight for these rights but called themselves liberals, she had nothing but contempt. Even at the height of the Cold War, she identified radical politics as a key site of racial and gender justice, telling an interviewer, “I don’t think that women or any of the minorities will ever be completely and totally free until you have socialism.”¹²³ In an echo of Claudia Jones’s writings in the 1940s and 1950s, Tenayuca too believed that women would lead movements for economic justice and civil rights, and that the entwined systems of white supremacy and capitalism were incompatible with women’s liberation.

Conclusion

Emma Tenayuca died on July 23, 1999. At her funeral, the priest eulogized: “She was the closest person I can think of in San Antonio to Rosa Parks. She was a person who suffered for civil rights.”¹²⁴ After her death, politicians and civil rights activists honored her commitment to the city’s Mexican and Mexican-American communities and, in particular, her actions during labor struggles in the 1930s. These celebrations highlighted her leadership of the pecan-shellers strike, which had come to symbolize the birth of the Mexican-American civil rights movement in San Antonio. They rarely mentioned Workers Alliance, or her communism.

During the 1930s, Tenayuca had personified the Popular Front’s threat to San Antonio’s Jim Crow political, economic, and social order: a working-class Mexican American and indigenous woman radical with political and community support, connections to Mexican socialists and American communists, and the charisma and intellect necessary to build and direct

¹²² Tenayuca to Ruthe Winegarten, May 2, 1983, RWP.

¹²³ Tenayuca, interview by Poyo, ITC.

¹²⁴ Quoted in Jarboe Russell, “The Voice that Shook San Antonio,” 5.

a multiracial, cross-class social movement. Consequently, she bore the brunt of both white supremacist, anticommunist attacks on the Popular Front, and its coalitions' resultant shift away from radicalism and community-labor mass actions toward liberalism and electoral politics. Shut out of a career in the labor movement and run out of her hometown for two decades, she still remained committed to Popular Frontism throughout her life. Her legacy represents not just the beginnings of the modern civil rights movement in the 1930s, but also the driving roles that a varied, multiracial network of radicals played in campaigns for civil liberties and economic justice for the rest of the century.

After the onset of the Cold War, the rise of liberalism muffled Popular Fronters' critiques of capitalism and calls for economic justice, in part by amplifying their ongoing public commitment to racial and gender justice and their quest for political representation. By the 1990s, Tenayuca had come to embody the past struggle for civil and labor rights for San Antonio's Mexican Americans during the Great Depression, an embodiment that obscures her more expansive lifelong Popular Front vision for the multiracial, working-class in America's Southwest.

Yet for her, Popular Frontism was always as much about steadfastness to the politics of labor and economic justice as it was to the politics of racial and gender justice. Although anticommunism and discrimination prevented her from building a permanent career in the labor and civil liberties movements, she never wavered on her commitment to Popular Front politics, and her dream of a multiracial working-class that demanded race, gender, and economic justice in equal measure. She may have given up her Party card, but she remained a Popular Fronter till her death. A more fitting marker in Plaza del Zacate / Milam Park would bear the words

Tenayuca spoke to an interviewer in 1983: “The idea of socialism, the idea of cooperative society still exists. Who’s going to begin it here?”¹²⁵

¹²⁵ Rips, “Living History,” 14.

CHAPTER SIX

“Organize everyone you can get your hands on”: Ah Quon McElrath’s Career in Social Work and Labor-Community-Political Organizing

“We got involved in women’s so-called politics very early, before they even thought about feminism because we figured that they were all part of the family, they are all affected by what happens to the male worker.”

Ah Quon McElrath, 2006¹

On June 8, 1949, hundreds of women on dueling picket lines marched in opposite circles in front of the ILWU’s headquarters on Honolulu’s Pier 11. A week earlier, members of We, the Women had begun daily public protests against ILWU officials for their leadership of the longshore workers’ strike, which had begun on May 1 and for which McElrath organized substantial support. The press called the women the “Broom Brigade,” in a nod to the brooms festooned with small American flags that they carried to symbolize their message to the ILWU’s rank-and-file members: sweep away your radical, un-American leaders. To hammer that message home, they held aloft placards stenciled with “Communism is a Cancer” and “Get *American* Leaders.”²

Members of the ILWU’s Women’s Auxiliary and Women’s Division, fed up with the Broom Brigade’s “million dollar picket line,” as they called it, began a counter-protest. Marching on the same sidewalk but in the reverse direction, the ILWU women carried signs castigating the Broom Brigade and We, the Women protesters as wealthy housewives. Some of the ILWU women criticized the protesters for a lack of gender solidarity. “You’re a Disgrace to Women,”

¹ McElrath, interview by author.

² “Women Resume Picketing of ILWU Office,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, June 1, 1949.

read one ILWU sign. Others painted them as exploitive employers: “We can’t hire maids on 8 cents.”³ Helen Kanahele, who was the Chair of the Democratic Party’s Finance Committee, an activist in the United Public Workers (UPW), and the sister of an ILWU striker, joined the counter picket every day. Even when wind and water lashed the pier, she marched. “The Broom Brigade, they went home because they didn’t want to get wet,” she later recalled. “We didn’t mind, we sang songs and kept walking.”⁴ Two years later, members of the ILWU’s Women’s Auxiliary elected her as the group’s president.

The first half of this chapter examines how collective action and political organizing created openings for McElrath, Kanahele, lawyer Harriet Bouslog, and activist Rachel Saiki to take on significant responsibility for changing Hawai’i’s discriminatory laws, challenging corporate and state power, and building the foundation of its modern social-welfare state, even as the ILWU’s and Democratic Party’s elected and official positions remained mostly closed to them.⁵ From the longshore strike of 1949, which shut down Hawai’i’s ports for six months, to the mass demonstrations protesting government hearings and the Hawaii Seven trial in the late 1950s, this section explores how anticommunism’s and colonialism’s legacies exacerbated deep

³ “Union Wives Join Show at Pier 11 Broom Brigade,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, June 8, 1949; “ILWU Women Picket Housewife Pickets,” *Honolulu Advertiser*, June 9, 1949; *The ILWU Dispatcher*, June 24, 1949.

⁴ “Democratic Women Hear Mrs. Quealy,” *Honolulu Advertiser*, April 7, 1949; Marian Roffman, “Helen Lake Kanahele,” in *Notable Women of Hawaii*, edited by Barbara Bennett Peterson (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1984), 195.

⁵ Although it would occasionally hire women as temporary rank-and-file organizers for specific campaigns, Hawai’i’s ILWU-Local 142 did not elect a woman to its top leadership until 2003, when Donna Domingo successfully ran for Vice-President. See “Statewide Vice-President,” *Voice of the ILWU*, 43, no. 7 (September 2003), 2; “Galdones Elected President,” *Voice of the ILWU*, 43, no. 9 (November 2003), 1.

divisions in Honolulu's communities. Political and economic fault lines played out on picket lines, in courtrooms, and in the Democratic Party.

Battles between the largely white We, the Women and the multiracial ILWU women's groups erupted not just during competing protests, but at House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) hearings and trials, and at Democratic Party conventions. By the 1950s, anticommunism had replaced the language of overt white supremacy, becoming the mainstay of attacks on ILWU leaders, members, and allies.⁶ Despite these assaults, by the time Congress voted to admit Hawai'i as a state in 1959, these women's workplace and community organizing had successfully built a politically and economically powerful multiracial labor movement on the islands.

The second half of the chapter begins with the launch of McElrath's official career as the ILWU's social worker in 1954. By then, despite the interference of the HUAC hearings and the Hawaii Seven trial, the union had secured medical and pension contract benefits, and a progressive, pro-labor majority on the territory's legislature. With the rank-and-file social work movement's theories still guiding her principles, McElrath played a major role in training union members how to help their co-workers, families, and communities access union and government benefits. She also advised the union's leadership on state and federal policy, particularly in healthcare and housing, and built a culture of community-labor collaborations. In 1965, she took an 18-month leave from the ILWU to enroll in graduate school in Michigan. During her studies,

⁶ Schrecker, *Many are the Crimes*, 391. Schrecker states that anticommunism was vital to white supremacists of the 1940s and 1950s because it provided them with a more up-to-date and respectable cover than mere racism and hooked them into a national network of right-wing activists.

she spent three months on a federally funded health program in Lowndes County, Alabama, where she worked with radical civil rights organizers.

McElrath and her community-labor allies, including Bouslog, Kanahele, and Saiki, continued to provide Hawai'i's working-class families with access to affordable housing and healthcare, job security, and political representation. Their activism resulted in Hawai'i's legislature passing some of the nation's most robust social welfare policies and civil rights laws. In union contracts and state legislation, Popular Front labor feminists advocated for economic justice, racial and gender equality, and civil rights for immigrants and indigenous Hawaiians. Despite local and national redbaiting and race-baiting, they used the structures available to them in the labor movement and democratic politics to secure civil rights and social welfare resources in union contracts and government legislation. These Popular Fronters would take their experiences from labor strikes and political organizing in the 1950s and 1960s into leadership roles in Hawai'i's labor movement and Democratic Party in the 1970s and 1980s. For decades, they led campaigns for equal pay for equal work, women's right to serve on juries, and the elimination of racial and class discrimination in workplaces, housing, and education.

After her retirement in 1981, McElrath continued to lobby the state legislature for improvements to social welfare policies, while serving as a popular public intellectual in Hawai'i. In the 1980s and 1990s, she co-founded new organizations to mobilize for government resources for the poor and the elderly. The local political establishment appointed her to government commissions and boards, and she used her public platform to publish essays and articles on Hawai'i's labor and political history in academic journals and local newspapers. Through her grassroots organizing, social work career, and intellectual work, McElrath, as one

journalist wrote in 1994, “helped to bring economic, political and social democracy to Hawaii by organizing the unions and strengthening their role in eliminating racial discrimination.”⁷

Putting McElrath and the other women at the center of Hawai’i’s transformation makes more visible the importance of labor-community alliances in the ILWU’s organizing strategy. These Popular Fronters developed an interracial working-class consciousness that endured throughout the twentieth century and never eclipsed their gender identity or their militant demands for women’s equality in politics, the workplace, and their communities.

Popular Front Labor and Political Organizing in the 1950s

The sugar and pineapple strikes of 1946 and 1947 had featured two phenomena that would define the labor movement and its opponents in the ensuing years: courtroom battles over civil rights and free speech, and anticommunist attacks on labor activists. Over the next decade, the Territory’s waterfront, cannery, and plantation workers—both men and women—all went on strike, demanding higher wages, equal pay, better housing and affordable healthcare. Each labor battle caused corporate employers to lobby for more restrictive labor laws, recruit or import strike breakers, and deploy armed police and private guards to arrest and spy on labor activists. Popular Front radicals, many of them Communist Party members or allies, led these strikes and the political organizing that toppled the Big Five oligarchy and the Republican Party’s dominance in the Territory’s legislature. McElrath and a network of labor feminists nurtured union and political participation by working-class people of color, and lobbied the Territory’s legislature to pass bills that would address racial, gender, and class discrimination on the islands.

⁷ “Three Outstanding Citizens with One Thing in Common: Public Education,” *Honolulu Advertiser*, May 2, 1994.

In parallel to the union's demands that the contracts it negotiated protect political speech and labor rights, Bouslog filed numerous civil suits challenging the government's anti-labor laws and discriminatory practices. These cases led to changes in the territory's legislation on riots and public assembly that made it more difficult for employers to leverage state authority against strikers.⁸ Bouslog successfully challenged Hawai'i's anti-picketing and anti-assembly laws as unconstitutional, transformed the islands' discriminatory jury pools, and protected free speech against anticommunist attacks.⁹ "I decided that there was something about the oppression of people here," she later recalled, "that turned me from what you might call 'parlor liberal' to radicalism."¹⁰ Bouslog led landmark legal battles for the expansion of labor and civil rights to Hawai'i's working-class people of color. Her efforts helped, one journalist wrote, "convert Hawaii from a near-feudal society to one in which respect for civil liberties and workers' rights are paramount."¹¹

In the late 1940s, responding to the large number of arrests and potential prosecutions of sugar and pineapple strikers and their supporters, Bouslog and her law partner Myer Symonds had launched an attack on the territory's grand jury system, charging local officials with racial, gender, and class discrimination. When police arrested hundreds of protesters on various counts during mass actions, Bouslog filed a motion to dismiss all charges on grounds that the grand jury

⁸ Falk, "Harriet Bouslog," 116.

⁹ For specific cases, see *Territory v. Kaholokula* (1947, unlawful assembly); *Alesna v. Rice* (1947, mass picketing); *ILWU v. Ackerman* (1948, race, gender, and class discrimination in grand jury lists).

¹⁰ T. Michael Holmes, *The Specter of Communism in Hawaii* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), 148.

¹¹ Harold Morse, "Harriet Bouslog won landmark labor cases," *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, April 22, 1998.

list did not reflect a cross-section of the community and did not allow women to serve, therefore violating the constitutional rights of the accused. She provided evidence that the jury pool excluded Koreans, Puerto Ricans, and Filipinos altogether, and over-represented the white population, which made up 42 percent of potential jurors but less than 4 percent of the territory's residents.¹² In 1949, a local court ruled that Hawai'i's jury list favored the "executive class" over "wage-earners," and declared it was a "gross trespass on the rights of free speech and assembly as guaranteed by the Constitution."¹³ Although Bouslog ultimately lost the case in California's Ninth District Supreme Court, her efforts made an early, public contribution to the process of diversifying Hawai'i's jury lists, which soon after became more economically and racially representative of the islands' population.¹⁴

The members of the ILWU's Women's Division and Women's Auxiliaries likewise continued to lead efforts to secure women's constitutional rights to serve on juries, efforts that had begun in 1932 when proponents of expanding the jury lists to include women had introduced legislation and appeared before Congressional Committees to make their case. In the late 1940s, the Women's Division Steering Committee, which included Saiki, Bouslog, and Kanahele, lobbied the territory's legislature to support House Bill 460, which would permit women to serve

¹² "ILWU Deflates Hawaii's Feudalism," *The ILWU Dispatcher*, January 7, 1949; Bill, "An Advocate for all Hawaii;" Horne, *Fighting in Paradise*, 165; Valdés, *Organized Agriculture*, 153.

¹³ "Grand Juries Dissolved by Hawaii Judges," *The ILWU Dispatcher*, January 21, 1949.

¹⁴ Horne, *Fighting in Paradise*, 165; Falk, "Harriet Bouslog," 116.

on juries in Hawai'i. The local campaign had successful parallels on the mainland. In 1952, President Truman signed what had become known as the "Women Jury Bill" into federal law.¹⁵

Equal political and civic representation for women and people of color would gain increasing importance over the next decade, as the ILWU embarked on another industry-wide strike and HUAC arrived in the territory. The mainland popular press published articles warning about labor's take-over of the islands, and local and national political officials worried too, especially about the activities of people of color. "An epidemic of strikes proves labor is in the saddle in the islands," one *Saturday Evening Post* journalist had cautioned his readers in 1947, "labor that is largely Asiatic in blood, with a grievance going deeper than wages, hours, and working conditions."¹⁶ The Territory of Hawai'i's governor, Ingram Stainback, was particularly concerned about the number of Asian Americans joining strikes and protests, which he took as evidence of their radicalism. "I regret to say that the most numerous converts in the territory are the Japanese Americans," he reportedly stated at a Young Buddhist convention in 1948.¹⁷ "Hawaii is the only spot at present where our domestic Communist problem is serious," U.S.

¹⁵ *The ILWU Dispatcher*, January 21, 1949; *The ILWU Dispatcher*, March 18, 1949; *Honolulu Advertiser*, April 7, 1949; "ILWU Women's Division," *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, April 2, 1949; "Democratic Women Hear Mrs. Quealy," *Honolulu Advertiser*, April 7, 1949. See *Qualifying Women for Jury Service: Hearings Before the Committee on Territories House of Representatives* (Washington DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1932); "Women Jury Bill Signed by Truman," *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, April 1, 1952. The new law went into effect on January 1, 1953.

¹⁶ Frank J. Taylor, "Labor Moves on in Hawaii," *Saturday Evening Post*, June 28, 1947, 24-25, 99-100. Taylor was particularly concerned about the "surge of confidence bordering on cockiness" that the successful strikes had "sparked in the Asiatic element of Hawaii's population."

¹⁷ Quoted in the *Honolulu Advertiser*, August 19, 1948.

Attorney General Tom Clark announced in 1949. “We may have to take some drastic action there.”¹⁸

On May 1, 1949, the ILWU launched the longshoremen’s strike that McElrath later described as the “crucible for Hawai’i’s workers.”¹⁹ The president of the union’s Longshore Division, communist Harry Kamoku, defined the strike as a struggle for racial equality—an effort to close the wage gap between the multiracial waterfront workers in Hawai’i and their predominantly white union brothers’ workforce on the mainland’s West Coast. The territory’s two thousand striking longshoremen demanded equal pay for equal work, a demand that would end what the ILWU leadership called the “colonial wage.”²⁰

Throughout the strike, despite growing unemployment, food insecurity, and anticommunist attacks, McElrath and a cross-class alliance of ILWU women mobilized to keep the islands’ communities on their side, and their husbands, brothers, and sons on picket lines. As the ILWU’s volunteer Social Services Coordinator, McElrath advised strikers on how to apply for welfare benefits, and secure debt relief from landlords and school tuition costs. “We had our own radio program. We had our own newspaper. We put out our own bulletins so that people could understand what the issues were,” she recalled. “We were successful, for example, in getting merchants, in getting the community to contribute money and food to our soup kitchen or to our food ration program.”²¹ Crucial to the strike’s success, Helen Kanahale and other

¹⁸ Charles P. Larrowe, *Harry Bridges: The Rise and Fall of Radical Labor in the United States* (New York: Lawrence Hill and Co., 1972), 276.

¹⁹ McElrath, “Race Relations and the Political Economy in Hawai’i,” 74-84.

²⁰ Beechert, “The Political Economy of Hawaii,” 166.

²¹ McElrath, interview by Roffman.

Women's Auxiliary members showed up for picket duty, provided daycare centers, and helped to feed thousands of strikers and their families in union soup kitchens.²²

Born in 1916 to an indigenous Hawaiian mother and white father who both died when she was young, Kanahale left school after the eighth grade to embark on a world tour with a Hawaiian hula dance group.²³ Following her return to Honolulu, she married and divorced a stonemason, and worked in several unionized civil service jobs, first as a hospital laundry worker, then as a school custodian. Voters elected her to numerous Democratic Party positions, and she was a lifelong First Amendment advocate. As a leader in the UPW, she protested the territorial governor's numerous attempts to impose a "no political activity rule" on all government employees.²⁴ "Every meeting where she was present," one of the UPW men recalled, "she dominated."²⁵ One historian has described her as "typical of the new blood that helped revive the Democrats" in Hawai'i during the 1940s and 1950s.²⁶

²² "Strikers' Families Picket Company," *Honolulu Record*, August 4, 1949; "Community Supports Longshoremen on Maui," *Honolulu Record*, August 4, 1949; Zalburg, *A Spark is Struck!*, 283..

²³ For more on Helen Kanahale, see Bill Puette, "Helen Lake Kanahale," in *Notable American Women: A Biographical Dictionary*, edited by Susan Ware, (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2004); "The Reminiscences of Helen Kanahale," New York Times Oral History Program, vol. 11, University of Hawaii Pacific Regional Oral History, History of the UPW in Hawai'i, 1975; Monahan, "Hawai'i's Twentieth Century Working Women: Labor Feminists in Their Own Right," 23-24; Bureau of the Census, *1940 United States Federal Census*, Honolulu, Honolulu County, Hawaii Territory, ancestry.com; "Left Wing Democrats May Seek Election of Helen Kanahale," *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, June 5, 1952.

²⁴ Thurston Twigg-Smith, "Civil Service Activity Rule Brings Protest," *Honolulu Advertiser*, August 13, 1951; "UPW Sounds Warning to Politicians," *Honolulu Advertiser*, September 8, 1956.

²⁵ Roffman, "Helen Lake Kanahale," 198.

²⁶ Horne, *Fighting in Paradise*, 212.

In the 1950s, McElrath, Bouslog, and Kanahale would not have referred to themselves as feminists, although they all laid claim to women's right to take part in politics and occupy public space, and each asserted that they represented women's interests. The longshore strike in 1949 provided opportunities for both labor feminists and anticommunist women activists to shape public policy and community attitudes toward the labor movement. In a battle over the larger community's support for the strike, ILWU women and We, the Women reprised the antagonism that had arisen during the sugar and pineapple strikes.

We, the Women activists took up the U.S. Attorney General's call to action during the ILWU's six-month strike on the islands' waterfronts, publicly targeting ILWU's leadership with picket lines and other public protests. For six weeks that summer, hundreds of women paraded on the Broom Brigade's picket on the pier. On several occasions, socialites in sundresses and high heels joined the protest, such as Louise Gaylord Dillingham, who was married to one of Hawai'i's wealthiest industrialists.²⁷ Mostly though, as McElrath later remembered, "employers let their secretaries, their nurses, their clerks take time off to march in this picket line."²⁸ Some of these Broom Brigade protestors, invoking their roles as mothers over their status as workers, brought along their children, who carried signs covered with drawings of empty milk bottles and a plea intended to tug on Honolulu's collective heartstrings: "We Want Milk."

The *Honolulu Advertiser's* editorial board gushed over the women's protest: "In a spirit of community sisterhood, the Broom Brigade has made a priceless contribution to mutual understanding and respect among the women of the several racial antecedents, which make up

²⁷ "Broom Brigade Draws Big Group of Women; ILWU Line Competes," *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, June 11, 1949; Zalburg, *A Spark is Struck!*, 250.

²⁸ McElrath, interview by Roffman.

Hawaii's population."²⁹ Historians, however, describe the Broom Brigade as an "employer front," and claim that nine out of ten participants were white housewives.³⁰ While not as multiracial as local newspapers claimed, the membership of the Broom Brigade and We, the Women did include a few elite Native Hawaiian women and some non-white middle-class professionals. Overall though, their disproportionate whiteness allowed the protestors to claim a stereotypical "American" identity while casting the workers as outsiders and dangers to national cohesion, despite the fact that a number of waterfront strikers were U.S. veterans who had served in World War II.

The strike, which shut down the islands' ports and interrupted deliveries of food and other goods from the mainland, drew national headlines and an outpouring of criticism directed at the union, mostly charges that communists were taking over Hawai'i. One consequence of the territory's plantation economy was that food staples, such as rice, flour, and animal feed had to be imported, as the islands' agricultural industries remained exclusively centered on sugarcane and pineapple. In the late 1930s, for example, rice consumption in Hawai'i was 40 percent higher than on the mainland, but the territory had to import over 95 percent of the needed grain. Before the strike had begun, many of the islands' residents had stocked up on rice and other non-perishables, and the union had pledged to unload perishable food during the strike. But as the months progressed, dairy and poultry farmers began to run out of feed, putting their herds and chicks at risk, local bakeries could no longer produce bread, and families' rice supplies

²⁹ "Editorial," *Honolulu Advertiser*, August 3, 1949.

³⁰ Zalburg, *A Spark is Struck!*, 251; Horne, *Fighting in Paradise*, 248.

dwindled. The food shortages led to a crisis for Hawai'i's communities, government, and the ILWU.³¹

The territory's government took action. The Department of Public Welfare suspended the government benefits that many strikers relied on to pay for food and rent in the hopes of forcing them back to work. In August, the legislature passed the Dock Seizure Act, which gave the local government control over hiring and operations on the waterfront (just as it had during the war). The Broom Brigade ended its public protests the day after the Act passed.

With new powers under the Act, the Honolulu harbormaster immediately hired—at prestrike wages—over one thousand unemployed men, who began to unload and then reload all the ships in the islands' ports, all except those bound for the West Coast. In September alone, the government longshore replacements unloaded over 100,000 tons of cargo for consumption in Hawai'i. The over 505,000 tons of sugar destined for the western coastline in America, however, stayed put on the docks. Members of ILWU locals from Seattle to San Francisco would not touch a 'hot ship,' one whose cargo non-union labor had handled. After more than six months of disrupting the flow of goods between the islands and the mainland, the strike ended on October 23, 1949. Solidarity between the islands' and the west coast's longshoremen did not completely eliminate the "colonial wage" system, but the new contract significantly shrunk the difference in wages.³² It also contained language protecting political activity and ending racial segregation in

³¹ Zalburg, *A Spark is Struck!*, 242-288; Horne, *Fighting in Paradise*, 215-233; *The Great Hawaii Dock Strike*, Rice and Roses, Center for Labor Education And Research, University of Hawai'i, West Oahu, 1999, DVD; "That Food is Needed Now," *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, May 7, 1949.

³² Horne, *Fighting in Paradise*, 193; Zalburg, *A Spark is Struck!*, 287. This victory shows how workers can win strikes even when the state intervenes on the side of management (in this case, the state actually hired the strike breakers), providing a counter-example to Erik Loomis's recent

company housing. Interracial and cross-gender solidarity among strikers and their supporters had held firm in the face of We, the Women's and the territorial government's anticommunist (and often racist) campaigns against the strike.

Such solidarity was not on display in the CIO's national leadership. By 1950, the CIO had expelled the ILWU and ten other leftwing unions for the alleged dominance of communists amongst its leadership, and for adhering to Communist Party dictates. The expulsion had little effect in Hawai'i. The ILWU locals on the islands and on the mainland survived the break and continued to grow their membership throughout the Second Red Scare.³³ Although Hawai'i's Communist Party likely never had more than a few hundred followers, its members, including Ah Quon and Robert McElrath, had an influence on the labor movement that far exceeded the Party's institutional presence.³⁴ "Where could [the ILWU leaders] have learned about strike strategy, how to carry an organizing drive through to a contract, all those things, if it hadn't been for the Communist Party?" recalled John Burns, a Democrat who later served as Hawai'i's governor from 1962 to 1974. "And you have to remember they belonged to the American Communist Party. There wasn't anything illegal about that, then."³⁵

contention that strikes require state assistance to win: see Loomis, *A History of America in Ten Strikes* (New York: The New Press, 2018).

³³ Kimeldorf, *Reds or Rackets?*, 127, 153; Schrecker, *Many are the Crimes*, 339-340. Historians state that the ILWU survived, in part, because its multiracial membership stayed loyal to the union's leadership. "With support from the large wartime influx of blacks, from his allies among the '34 men, and from the political left," writes Kimeldorf, Harry Bridges "was able to ride out the Cold War turbulence that toppled so many of his contemporaries in the American labor movement."

³⁴ Horne, *Fighting in Paradise*, 100.

³⁵ Larowe, *Harry Bridges*, 283. The Communist Control Act outlawed the CPUSA in 1954, but a federal district court deemed the Act unconstitutional in 1973.

Not all politicians and local officials were as complimentary about Communist Party members' leadership in the territory's labor movement, however, and anticommunism remained a formidable weapon against the territory's labor and progressive movements, as did its twin, white supremacy. The former often masked the latter in attempts to deprive people of color of their democratic rights. "Turn over a red-baiter and you will find a race-baiter," ILWU leader Louis Goldblatt had cautioned union members in 1948, "Turn over a race-baiter and you will find a red-baiter."³⁶

Government and industry leaders used anticommunism to delegitimize demands for civil liberties and labor rights in Hawai'i, as elsewhere. In 1947, an anonymous pamphlet, *The Truth About Communism in Hawaii*, had begun appearing in canneries and on plantations and waterfronts all over the islands. Ichiro Izuka, formerly a local leader of ILWU longshoremen, and Arnold Wills, director of Hawai'i's branch of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), authored the exposé, which named the McElraths, Saiki, and John Reinecke, among many others, as Communist Party members.³⁷ Wills, an anticommunist socialist, later explained that he was concerned about the power communists were "exerting over labor in Hawaii."³⁸ He was not the only government official worried about radical influences on Hawai'i's politics and institutions. The territory's Deputy Attorney General testified at Commission of Public Instruction hearings on communists teaching in public schools, while U.S. Army personnel provided Governor

³⁶ Quoted in Jung, *Reworking Race*, 176. Goldblatt used this turn of phrase thirteen years before Martin Luther King, Jr., addressing a 1961 AFL-CIO convention, famously remarked, "the labor-hater and labor-baiter is virtually always a twin-headed creature spewing anti-Negro epithets from one mouth and anti-labor propaganda from the other mouth."

³⁷ *The Truth About Communism in Hawaii*, AQM Papers, CLEAR; Reinecke, *A Man Must Stand Up*, 48.

³⁸ Zahlberg, *A Spark is Struck!*, 75.

Stainback with a list of CPUSA members active in Hawai'i.³⁹ It was a short list, but it included the names of a multiracial group of newspaper publishers and journalists, public school teachers, labor leaders, and government employees.

“If you were called a Red at that time,” McElrath later recalled, “your means of livelihood was taken away from you.”⁴⁰ She knew this from personal experience. Even though the territory had a shortage of qualified and trained social workers, the Department of Public Welfare’s head refused to rehire her as a social worker after her maternity leave in 1946.⁴¹ The department then fired McElrath’s colleague Yoshiko Hall, who was married to ILWU leader Jack Hall.

By April 1950, HUAC had arrived in Honolulu and subpoenaed over seventy people to testify at hearings on communist activities in the Territory. The Committee targeted a multiracial group of radicals, labor activists, and Democratic Party officials. Eighty percent of those called to testify were people of color; over half had a direct connection to the ILWU, the Hawaii Civil Liberties Committee, or the radical newspaper, the *Honolulu Record*; and roughly a quarter had been elected to serve as delegates or alternates at the Democratic Party convention to be held that same month.⁴²

³⁹ Reinecke, *A Man Must Stand Up*, 49; Horne, *Fighting in Paradise*, 140-142.

⁴⁰ McElrath, interview by Mast, 7.

⁴¹ Iris Carlton-LaNey and Christine S. Main, “Clorinda Low Lucas: Hawaii’s Social Work Pioneer,” *Social Service Review* 84, no. 2 (2010), 283-308.

⁴² “Hearings Regarding Communist Activities in the Territory of Hawaii, Part 1,” U.S. Congress, 81st, 2nd Session, House Committee on Un-American Activities, Hearings Held in Honolulu, April 10, 11, 12, 1950. Rachel Saiki, for example, was the bookkeeper for the *Honolulu Record*.

Large audiences, including many members of We, the Women, attended the three days of HUAC hearings, where Saiki and Robert McElrath, along with thirty-seven others, refused to answer the Committee's questions. At the last minute, the Committee had voided Ah Quon McElrath's subpoena, along with those of several other women whose husbands had also been called to testify. "One McElrath was enough," she later told a journalist.⁴³ Bouslog and her law partner represented the subpoenaed witnesses during the hearings, framing the government's actions as attacks on free speech and the freedom of the press. On behalf of the Reluctant 39, as the group was nicknamed in the press, they argued that the government could not legally "compel disclosure of private political opinion and association," and that the hearings would "stigmatize the content of any and all speech and ideas disapproved by the members of the Committee."⁴⁴

Meanwhile, ILWU members had begun demonstrating against the anticommunist attacks on the union's leaders and their allies in 1948. Locals on the west coast and on the islands' had held several one-day strikes to protest the federal government's arrest of its international president Harry Bridges. Over the next few years, the state's attacks on labor leaders and civil rights activists in Hawai'i led to repeated strikes and demonstrations involving tens of thousands of protestors.⁴⁵

The HUAC hearings threatened the ILWU's political organizing at the Hawai'i Democratic Party's annual convention, held a few weeks later. On Sunday, April 30, at the

⁴³ Manuel, "Her Bottom Line is Human Rights."

⁴⁴ "Hearings Regarding Communist Activities in the Territory of Hawaii, Part 1;" Holmes, *The Specter of Communism in Hawaii*, 230.

⁴⁵ Johannessen, *The Hawaiian Labor Movement*, 133; Horne, *Fighting in Paradise*, 236.

Kalakaua School in Honolulu's working-class Kalihi neighborhood, the convention brought together over five hundred Democrats to hammer out resolutions and the Party's platform for the next election. In folding chairs clustered around the school hall sat immigrants from China, Japan, and the Philippines, Hawai'i-born Asian Americans, indigenous Hawaiians, and white transplants from the U.S. mainland. "The Democratic Party is changing its complexion," announced the keynote speaker. Surveying the delegates, precinct committee chairs, elected government officials, and labor allies in attendance, he proclaimed, "A new Democratic Party is coming into existence."⁴⁶

The ILWU's leadership and grassroots organizers had spent the better part of a decade recruiting union members and allies, many of whom were people of color, to join local Democratic precinct clubs, lead voter registration drives, and run for local elected offices. In the 1930s, pro-employer politicians had dominated both the Republican and Democratic Parties in Hawai'i. Consequently, Jack Hall had launched the territory's first CIO Political Action Committee (PAC) in 1938, and had promptly recruited the first union-endorsed, pro-labor candidate to win a seat in Hawai'i's legislature.⁴⁷ Women played important roles in these political campaigns. Alongside local rank-and-file labor leaders, McElrath had registered new voters and turned them out for labor-endorsed candidates for Hawai'i's Territorial Government. "It was through the activities of the PAC," she recalled, "that union people became elected to office as members of the Democratic Party."⁴⁸ As she later told an interviewer, "I remember

⁴⁶ "Kalakaua Faction Views Self as New Dem Party," *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, May 1, 1950.

⁴⁷ For accounts of the ILWU's early political organizing efforts, see Beechert, "Political Economy," 165; Zalburg, *A Spark is Struck!*, 117; David E. Thompson, "The ILWU as a Force for Interracial Unity in Hawaii," *Social Process in Hawaii* 15 (1951), 32-43.

⁴⁸ McElrath, "The Challenge is Still There," 146.

working on street corners, going house-to-house, making speeches at trade union meetings and community gatherings as to why the ILWU was supporting such and such candidate.”⁴⁹

Political action had intensified during the war. In 1944, Hall had realized that only thirty percent of ILWU members across the islands were registered to vote, let alone countless numbers of their relatives and neighbors. In response, the union launched an ambitious outreach effort on the islands’ plantations and waterfronts, and in the canneries and working-class neighborhoods. “We have a full-time staff of four women,” Hall wrote to a fellow union official, “in addition to some volunteer help for intensifying the registration drive.”⁵⁰

But the ILWU’s radical leaders did not limit the union’s political efforts to mere endorsements of individual pro-labor politicians, or mobilizations of voters during election campaigns. To ensure that the territory’s political structures reflected the demographics of plantations, canneries, and waterfronts rather than executive suites and boardrooms, they also encouraged rank-and-file members and community leaders to join PACS in their workplaces and neighborhoods. The goal was to build governing power in local institutions. Hall urged labor and community activists to “get elected as county committeemen or committeewomen and as chairmen or secretary of their precinct clubs” in the Democratic Party.⁵¹ Grassroots leaders also ran for school board seats as a way to oversee education budgets and policies.⁵² With working-class and multiracial representation in all levels of politics, ILWU leaders suggested, unionists

⁴⁹ McElrath, interview by Roffman.

⁵⁰ Jack Hall to Louis Goldblatt, June 15, 1944, quoted in Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore*, 407.

⁵¹ Zalburg, *A Spark is Struck!*, 223.

⁵² McElrath, interview by author.

and community allies had a better chance of defeating anti-labor laws and racist policies, such as discriminatory jury selection, unlawful assembly ordinances, and anti-picketing statutes.

Moreover, a pro-labor and anti-racist Democratic Party would potentially support social welfare policies that provided better and more equal education, housing, and healthcare.

Not all Democratic Party officials and members shared the ILWU's vision of a multiracial democracy and grassroots political participation. The HUAC hearings exacerbated these intra-party divisions, putting them on display at the Democratic Party's convention in 1950. In the school's cafeteria, Robert McElrath, the ILWU's radical political director and one of the Reluctant 39, shared the space with Ed Berman, an anticommunist lawyer. Kanahele, Saiki, and Bouslog, all elected precinct chairwomen and delegates, mingled with the anticommunist leader of the Democratic Women's Organization, Victoria Holt, whose late husband had served in the territory's House of Representatives for many years.⁵³

Sitting among the Democratic Convention crowd on that Sunday afternoon, Kanahele and others witnessed the Party's acrimonious split into two factions, ostensibly over communists' participation, but equally over competing visions for Hawai'i's economic development. Long-simmering tensions over the growing influence of ILWU activists and an increasing number of non-white political officials led to hours of contentious debate over dueling platform proposals and controversial resolutions from the two sides. Late in the afternoon, the Convention Chair called for final vote on a resolution to expel Saiki and fourteen other democratically elected delegates from the Democratic Party for refusing to answer questions during the HUAC hearings. "Nothing I ever participated in can be said to be un-American, or against the

⁵³ "Victoria Holt Enters Race for T. H. Delegate," *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, May 25, 1948; "Democratic Precincts Name Officers," *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, April 7, 1950.

government,” Saiki later claimed.⁵⁴ Kanahele and over one hundred and seventy other elected delegates rose from their seats to vote down the resolution. They won decisively, in a 171-94 result.⁵⁵

In a dramatic response, Berman and ninety resolution supporters abruptly walked out of the convention in protest. “Dixiecrats,” shouted several victorious delegates at their departing opponents. The walkout, wrote Black communist Frank Marshall Davis who was living in Hawai’i at the time, was a “replica of the 1948 National Democratic Convention when a number of Southern delegates got tired of democracy.”⁵⁶ The conservative delegates later regrouped at an American Legion hall in Waikiki to vote on their own platform. The simultaneous conventions ratified markedly different platforms, a contrast that reveals the competing visions in Hawai’i’s labor and political movements.⁵⁷

The almost four hundred Party activists who remained at the Kalakaua school proceeded to craft, discuss, and ratify a progressive, pro-civil liberties and labor rights platform. The multiracial and cross-class group—plantation laborers and small business owners, high school dropouts and college graduates, school custodians and city officials, union stewards and

⁵⁴ Viotti, “Activist Life: Rachel Saiki will be honored.”

⁵⁵ For accounts of the convention, see “Democratic Party Splits; Both Groups Seek National Support,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, May 1, 1950; “Kalakaua Faction Views Self as New Dem Party,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, May 1, 1950.

⁵⁶ Quoted in Thomas Michael Holmes, “The Specter of Communism in Hawaii, 1947-1953 (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Hawaii, 1975), 234; original source, *Honolulu Record*, May 4, 1950.

⁵⁷ Contemporary newspapers referred to the two factions as the Standpat and Walkout groups. See Zalburg, *A Spark is Struck!*, 299-302; Holmes, *The Specter of Communism*, 232.

Women's Auxiliary activists—had successfully, if briefly, defended free speech and radical activism.

By contrast, the Waikiki group echoed the Democratic governor's anticommunist, pro-business liberal economic development agenda, and listed broad but vague support for the Truman administration's programs for civil rights, welfare, and fair employment practices. Most of its platform's planks, however, aimed to protect the limited gains that CIO unions had pushed for in the New Deal, such as "enacting a minimum wage law similar to the federal government's and to increase maximum benefits under workmen's compensation."⁵⁸ Economic development was a clear priority, and several policy proposals centered on future construction, such as slum clearance, new housing for low and middle-income residents, and a public works program. Healthcare and civil rights are absent from the platform. In a clear attack on grassroots Party organization, the Waikiki faction also declared all (democratically elected) precinct clubs dissolved, with the idea that they would reestablish the clubs themselves.

Where the Waikiki group attacked its own grassroots Party members, the Kalakaua faction's platform upheld them, illustrating the priorities that drove the radical-led, multiracial coalition's legislative agenda for the next few decades. It addressed economic (class) inequality in taxes, housing, and education, calling specifically for fair taxes, unemployment insurance, a low cost housing program, rent control, welfare aid for the poor, and free schoolbooks. Going beyond bread-and-butter economic demands, however, the platform also attempted to address racial and gender discrimination on the islands. The delegates approved proposals to eliminate racial discrimination in housing and education, support a path to U.S. citizenship for Filipinos, allow women to serve on juries, and give the Democratic Party's committeewomen equal status

⁵⁸ "Break Away Group Sets Up Machinery," *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, May 1, 1950.

with committeemen.⁵⁹ The Kalakaua delegates promised to expand citizenship rights and civil liberties for the multiracial working-class. Under continuing pressure, however, at a precinct club meeting held several months after the convention, the Kalakaua Democratic Party officials did vote to suspend Rachel Saiki and several other delegates from the Party for refusing to sign a statement that they were not members of the Communist Party. They stopped short of expulsion, but it seemed that even leftwing Hawai'i Democrats were not immune to the climate of partisan consensus on anticommunism.⁶⁰

In the summer of 1951, the battles over free speech and civil rights intensified in Hawai'i and on the mainland. In January, a federal judge in Hawai'i had acquitted the Reluctant 39 of their contempt charges for not answering the government's questions, claiming that the charges violated any witness's constitutional right to remain silent during a congressional hearing.⁶¹ But it was a different story on the mainland. In June, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld a number of CPUSA national leaders' convictions under the Alien Registration Act of 1940 (also known as the Smith Act). The *Dennis v. United States* decision found that the government could ignore communists' First Amendment rights and political freedoms in the event of a "clear and present danger" to American national security.⁶²

⁵⁹ "Kalakaua Faction Views Self as New Dem Party," *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, May 1, 1950.

⁶⁰ "Demo Precinct Club Oks Suspension of 5 for Silence at House Probe," *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, July 29, 1950.

⁶¹ Zalburg, *A Spark is Struck!*, 303.

⁶² The *Dennis v. United States* upheld the convictions of 11 of the CPUSA's top leaders: Eugene Dennis, Ben Davis, John Gates, Gil Green, Gus Hall, Irving Potash, Jacob Stachel, Robert Thompson, John Williamson, Henry Winston, and Carl Winter. See Schrecker, *Many are the Crimes*, 190-200.

Consequently, the FBI extended its dragnet of radical and labor leaders beyond the Party's highest-ranking officials. The new targets included Claudia Jones, arrested in June in New York, and Jack Hall, arrested in August in Honolulu. Charged with conspiracy to advocate and teach the violent overthrow of the government, Hall and six others, known as the Hawaii Seven, hired the Bouslog & Symonds firm and a California-based lawyer, Richard Gladstein, to represent them. Besides Hall, the accused included two newspaper writers, two teachers, and a former ILWU employee (four were Japanese-American and three white). The trial was scheduled to begin November 1952; it would last for seven months.⁶³

As the defendants and their lawyers began preparing for the trial, the ILWU continued to organize. At a Labor Day picnic and parade on September 2, 1951, Bouslog announced to more than four thousand union members and their families: "Now there is nothing in the United States Constitution that says that capitalism and democracy are the same."⁶⁴ Her message that pro-labor (or anti-capitalist) activists were not against democracy came through loud and clear.

Throughout the islands, ILWU and other union members gathered in public parks and at mass meetings to celebrate Labor Day in a show of strength during an ongoing strike in the pineapple fields and canneries, and to send a message to the sugar industry as the union began contract negotiations. The crowds also protested the recent arrests of the Hawaii Seven. The parade

⁶³ The Hawaii Seven were: Jack Hall, Koji Ariyoshi (editor of the *Honolulu Record*), Jack Kimoto (head of the local CPUSA branch, writer for the *Honolulu Record*), Charles Fujimoto (Chairman of the local CPUSA), Eileen Fujimoto (former secretary for the ILWU), John Reinecke (IPA member, teacher and union activist), James Freeman (CPUSA organizer). "Harriet Bouslog Tells of Case of the Hawaii 7," *Honolulu Record*, September 3, 1951; Zalburg, *A Spark is Struck!*, 323.

⁶⁴ "Harriet Bouslog Tells Case of Hawaii 7," *Honolulu Record*, September 3, 1951.

included ILWU and UPW members carrying signs supporting Jack Hall, and pledging to “Organize the Unorganized.”⁶⁵

After losing her job at the Department of Public Welfare in 1946, McElrath had enrolled in a three-month course in legal stenography. She had planned to work as a legal secretary for Bouslog, but instead continued to perform research and grassroots union and political organizing for the ILWU. In the months leading up to the trial, however, she worked alongside Saiki and Bouslog to organize activities and fundraising for the ILWU Defense Committee. The Committee raised funds to pay for legal fees, and published a weekly bulletin that connected the Hawaii Seven’s arrests to Harry Bridges’s Smith Act trial in Los Angeles, painting both as attacks on freedom of the press and on the labor movement. In February 1952, Bouslog and the other lawyers again challenged the constitutionality of Hawai’i’s grand jury pool based on its high percentage of white potential jurors. They were partly successful: the jury ultimately included several Asian Americans, but no women.⁶⁶

The impending trial drew more attention when famous actor John Wayne arrived in Hawai’i to film his anticommunist drama, *Big Jim McLain*, in which he plays a FBI agent investigating communists for HUAC’s “Operation Pineapple.”⁶⁷ Shot during the spring of 1952, it premiered in Honolulu in August. In February earlier that year, Richard English, one of the screenplay’s co-writers, had published an exposé of supposed communist infiltration in the

⁶⁵ “ILWU Scores Hall’s Arrest; AFL Urges Drive on Reds,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, September 4, 1951. The ILWU and the AFL held dueling Labor Day parades that year.

⁶⁶ Zalberg, *A Spark is Struck!*, 219.

⁶⁷ Richard English, a journalist for the *Saturday Evening Post*, co-wrote the screenplay. For an example of his anticommunist articles, see Richard English, “We Almost Lost Hawaii to the Reds,” *Saturday Evening Post*, February 2, 1952; English, “What Makes a Hollywood Communist,” *Saturday Evening Post*, May 19, 1951.

ILWU in Hawai'i. "The strong red roots of the ILWU beanstalk on which the communists climbed to almost terrifying power are much too malignant," he warned, implying that like a cancer they must be cut away.⁶⁸ *Big Jim McLain* begins and ends with scenes of fictionalized HUAC hearings—the first in Washington DC, the second in Honolulu—during which the accused successfully use the Fifth Amendment to escape punishment for their crime of being communist.

The film's central message is that, despite heroic efforts from the FBI and HUAC, the court's respect for the Constitution allows the bad guys (communists depicted as murderers, racists, and union infiltrators) to get away. "We, the citizens of the United States of America, owe these [HUAC men], our elected representatives, a great debt," the voice-over begins in the film's first scene. "Undaunted by the vicious claims of slander launched against them as a whole and as individuals, they have staunchly continued their investigations according to their stated beliefs that anyone who continued to be a communist after 1945 is guilty of high treason."⁶⁹ The *New York Times* panned the film as a sappy romance, but also admonished the filmmakers for making light of both communism's and anticommunism's threats to political freedoms. "[T]he overall mixing of cheap fiction with a contemporary crisis in American life is irresponsible and unforgivable," wrote the film critic.⁷⁰

For the ILWU and its community allies, anticommunists' lurid fantasies would continue to play out less cinematically but no less dramatically in Honolulu, and on the West Coast. In

⁶⁸ English, "We Almost Lost Hawaii to the Reds."

⁶⁹ Edwin Ludwig, dir., *Big Jim McLain* (1952; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2007), DVD.

⁷⁰ Bosley Crowther, "'Big Jim McLain,' Film Study of Congressional Work Against Communism," *New York Times*, September 18, 1952.

September 1952, twenty thousand ILWU longshoremen walked off the job in California to protest the state Supreme Court's decision to uphold Harry Bridges's conviction and prison sentence. The Hawaii Seven's trial finally began in November. Sitting in the courtroom each day, We, the Women members formed a cheering section that enhanced the spectacle surrounding the trial.⁷¹ On one day, they listened to an opponent from their Broom Brigade counter-protests. From the witness stand, Helen Kanahale, though never a CPUSA member herself, publicly avowed her own commitment to communists' rights to free speech and to hold political opinions. "I think they have a right to be Communists if they want to," she testified. "It's their privilege."⁷²

The members of the ILWU Defense committee, including McElrath and Bouslog, spent little time in the courtroom, instead performing the hours of research necessary to prepare for court each day. "You had to analyze what went on [during the hearings] in order that the attorneys would know what to do the following day," McElrath recalled. "It was a really big job."⁷³ Bouslog later complained to a journalist that sexist defense lawyers shunted her out of the courtroom and back to the office. "None of them would let me say a goddamned thing," she protested. "Oh, the male chauvinists."⁷⁴ She saved her sharpest criticism, however, for the government's prosecutors. "There's no such thing as a fair trial in a Smith Act case," she told a group of ILWU members in December. "All the rules of evidence...have to be scrapped or the

⁷¹ Horne, *Fighting in Paradise*, 248.

⁷² "Mayor on Stand for Jack Hall," *Honolulu Advertiser*, April 9, 1953.

⁷³ McElrath, "The Challenge is Still There," 150.

⁷⁴ Zalburg, *A Spark is Struck!*, 348.

government can't make a case...They just make up the rules as they go along."⁷⁵ Hawai'i's Bar Association would later strip Bouslog of her license for making this statement, a punishment that she fought all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, and won.

Almost two years after Hall's arrest, the jury convicted the Hawaii Seven. The judge sentenced them each to five years in prison, but the defense lawyers immediately appealed and none of the defendants ultimately served any part of their official sentences.⁷⁶ In July 1953, thousands of ILWU members and their community allies join one-day walkouts to protest HUAC and the convictions, protests that continued over the next few years. In December 1956, thousands of ILWU members again walked off their jobs on plantations and waterfronts to protest Mississippi Senator James Eastland's Internal Security Subcommittee hearings in Honolulu. The committee had subpoenaed both Ah Quon and Robert McElrath, among others. The protesters greeted Eastland, a racist who opposed statehood for Hawai'i, with a parade of signs, some stenciled with "ILWU Supports Democracy for All Races" and others denouncing white supremacy.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Zalburg, *A Spark is Struck!*, 349.

⁷⁶ Horne, *Fighting in Paradise*, 236. Horne claims that the Hawaii Seven trial marked the beginning of the end of the local labor movement's radicalism. However, he ends his study with statehood in 1959, and does not trace the legacies of this radicalism into the 1960s and 1970s.

⁷⁷ Yung, *Reworking Race*, 159; "1,700 Workers at Olaa Sugar Company Suspended for Walkout," *Hilo Tribune-Herald*, December 4, 1956; "Workers at Pioneer Mill Company and Wailuku Sugar Company Receive One-Day Suspensions after Work Stoppage in Protest of Eastland Hearings," *Maui News*, December 5, 1956.

The Making of a Union Social Worker

In 1954, four years after the contentious split in the Democratic Party's convention, union members and union-endorsed candidates successfully organized what became known as the "Democratic Revolution," when the electorate voted in a progressive, pro-labor Democratic Party majority to govern the territory's legislature for the first time.⁷⁸ At the same time, the ILWU hired forty-year-old McElrath as the union's social worker.

"When Democratic candidates talked issues, the Republicans yelled Red!" the pro-labor *Honolulu Record* editorialized that year. "When Democrats talked about such things as taxes, unemployment and land, the Republicans screamed Communist."⁷⁹ In the context of the Korean War, the mainland's labor movement, too, had continued its campaign against communists in its ranks. By 1955, the AFL-CIO merger agreement made explicit its "determination to keep the merged federation free from any taint of corruption or communism."⁸⁰ The national merger exacerbated tensions between the ILWU and other labor unions on the islands, but the independent ILWU carried on organizing and building political power. The merger did create a personal consequence for McElrath. In the late 1950s, the local AFL-CIO refused to recognize her as labor's representative on a state workers' compensation committee.⁸¹

⁷⁸ For more on the Democratic Revolution, see Tom Coffman, *The Island Edge of America: A Political History of Hawai'i* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003), 148-153; Zalburg, *A Spark is Struck!*, 374-381.

⁷⁹ Editorial, *Honolulu Record*, November 3, 1954.

⁸⁰ "The AFL-CIO Merger Agreement," reprinted in *ILR Review*, 9, no. 1 (October 1955): 122-124. For more on the history of the CIO, see Zieger, *The CIO, 1935-1955*; Lichtenstein, *Labor's War at Home: The CIO in World War II*.

⁸¹ Manuel, "Her Bottom Line is Human Rights."

After the Democratic Revolution, the territory increased education spending, lowered college tuition costs, doubled welfare assistance funding, expanded public housing, raised the minimum wage, and improved unemployment benefits.⁸² The ILWU's almost two decades of community and political organizing had led to concrete successes for working people beyond the benefits of a union contract. Political representation at local and territory-wide levels gave working-class communities some measure of control over legislation and government resources.

In 1959, Congress voted to admit Hawai'i as America's fiftieth state. A year earlier, the U.S. Supreme Court had overturned all of the Smith Act convictions, including that of Jack Hall and the other Hawaii Seven defendants. White supremacy and anticommunism, however, had driven the debate over statehood for the territory. Those arguing against statehood claimed that Hawai'i's non-white majority would never be truly "American," and that the Soviet Union would use its perceived influence on the islands to interfere with U.S. domestic politics. Some of those who supported statehood did so, in part, because they believed it would contain and perhaps diminish leftist activism on the islands.⁸³ While many politicians, business leaders, and union officials—before and after the territory became a state—viewed Hawai'i as part of American politics and society, they also often excluded radical activists and Asian Americans in their imagination of who was deserving of American citizenship and its rights.⁸⁴ For McElrath and other progressive organizers, the struggle continued after statehood.

⁸² Lawrence Boyd, "The End of Hawaii's Plantations: Back to the Future?," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 54 (March 1996), 102.

⁸³ Horne, *Fighting in Paradise*, 162-174.

⁸⁴ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 98.

The grassroots organizing and legal work that women, such as McElrath, Saiki, Bouslog, and Kanahele, performed in both the union and the Democratic Party had provided a significant part of the foundation for Hawai'i's transformation after the "Democratic Revolution." In the 1950s and 1960s, these Popular Fronters would continue to advocate for union contracts and legislation that expanded and protected citizenship rights and government benefits for Hawai'i's multiracial working class, especially for women. On the mainland, the labor movement's purge of leftwing unions had swept healthcare reform and demands for an expanded social welfare state from its political agenda, but in Hawai'i these priorities remained central to the ILWU.⁸⁵

By the mid-1950s, the ILWU had achieved significant social welfare victories in union contracts and government legislation, and sought someone to oversee its negotiated health and pension plans, which covered tens of thousands of workers and their families, and develop its member education programs.⁸⁶ The ILWU "needed a social worker to look into some of the aspects of human behavior and living, which would affect the way medical plans should be negotiated," McElrath later recalled.⁸⁷ By 1954, she had racked up twenty years of experience in labor, community, and political organizing, as well as in research of the islands' labor structures and laws. As the union's social worker, she became, in the words of one journalist, "one of the intellectuals of the movement, one of the researchers whose facts and figures often flabbergasted the employers and helped tilt the bargaining in labor's favor."⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Schrecker, *Many are the Crimes*, 369, 384.

⁸⁶ Zalburg, *A Spark is Struck!*, 437.

⁸⁷ McElrath, interview by Mast, 310.

⁸⁸ Smyser, "A Lifetime of Laboring to Make Hawaii Better."

Despite FBI surveillance, HUAC subpoenas, and AFL and CIO blacklisting, she was never silent or secretive about her radical politics.⁸⁹ She continued to embrace the theory of radical social work that she had read about in *Social Work Today* in the 1930s, with its focus on grassroots organizing and the issues of civil rights, housing, public health, and unemployment resources. Her Popular Front vision paralleled the ILWU's dedication to cross-class, multiracial trade unionism and community-labor organizing, as well as the CPUSA's commitment to a political education that provided opportunities for rank-and-file union members and community activists to learn about strategy and organizing. Historians have shown that in response to anticommunist attacks, many labor activists shifted their priorities to bread-and-butter economic issues, while countless social workers turned from government social service jobs to private sector work as therapists.⁹⁰ Yet as public sector unions purged radical social work caseworkers elsewhere, the ILWU recognized McElrath's value and talents. Her research and organizing abilities, and her knowledge of government social programs gained during both her volunteer activities for the labor movement and her career in social work, made her a perfect fit for the job.

McElrath's long social work career illustrates that some union leaders and social workers did survive anticommunist blacklists and legislation, entering what became the civil rights era with their radicalism intact. The ILWU gave her an institutional home that allowed her to keep fighting for gender and racial equality, challenging Hawai'i's anti-labor laws, and lobbying for

⁸⁹ "Communist Activities in the Territory of Hawaii," FBI Honolulu Field Division Report to the Joint Committee on the Investigation of the Pearl Harbor Attack, AQM at UH.

⁹⁰ Schrecker, *Many are the Crimes*, 384-386; Walkowitz, *Working with Class*, 217, 312. Walkowitz claims that few radical social workers after 1970 were willing to be public about their politics, and that most had become more liberal, shifting their careers to the private sector. Schrecker writes that McCarthyism silenced the voices of social workers and others who had a more structural understanding of poverty that did not "blame the victim."

social welfare legislation. More significant to her, however, was the work she did with the union's membership and their communities. "I am most proud of the fact that I helped to extend the level of understanding of people so that they could understand medical plans, they could understand pension plans," she told an interviewer in the 1980s, and that they "feel that, by golly they have a contribution to make, that they are the backbone of the union."⁹¹

For the next twenty-five years, McElrath pushed the union leadership, the employers, and the government on a broad social welfare agenda. Her expertise grew as she honed her skills navigating government and employer programs, but she remained committed to organizing, and to teaching union and community members how to advocate for themselves, their co-workers, and their neighbors with employers and elected representatives, without needing to rely on professionals. "The minute the trade union movement leaves out the word 'movement,' and thinks only of where it is going for itself," she warned, "forget it, it ain't going anywhere."⁹²

Political education programs for union members and their families remained a key priority for her. Beginning in 1946, the ILWU had run a workers' school in Honolulu, open to the public, called the Labor Canteen. It allowed each union member to take two free courses from among its offerings on, for example, Hawai'i's economic history and the U.S.'s "minority problems."⁹³ McElrath served as the treasurer for the Labor Canteen, until it shut its doors in 1952, another casualty of anticommunism on the islands. For the ILWU, she devised education programs that would not just to teach members about their contract benefits, but also help them evaluate local school budgets and understand the history of how the union built political power

⁹¹ McElrath, "We gave workers a sense of dignity," 263.

⁹² McElrath, interview by author.

⁹³ "Labor Canteen Plans New Training Course," *Honolulu Advertiser*, January 22, 1946.

and won those contracts. “Our idea was to train indigenous leadership to recognize problems that were occurring on the job, as well as off the job,” she remembers, “We had members on school advisory boards and land utilization committees.”⁹⁴

McElrath was the first woman on the union’s paid staff, and remained the only one for decades. As a labor feminist, she critiqued the union for the dearth of women in its elected leadership. “While we are a very democratic union, I think prejudices die hard,” she told an interviewer in 1977. “Basically the men in the union can still not visualize a woman being a business agent or a high-level union officer. This is so much outside of their experience that getting them to change their attitudes involves a great deal of work.”⁹⁵ Within the male-dominated leadership, she pushed the union, as a local newspaper later reported, “to look beyond the salary issues and to go after standard-of-living improvements like occupational safety, ethnic equality, healthcare, and education.”⁹⁶ She worked closely with ILWU Women’s Auxiliary members to advocate for improvements to low-income public housing on the sugar plantations, where many dwellings were still dilapidated shacks. In 1957, for example, the ILWU secured the funding for a new development on Ewa plantation that resulted in the building of over 200 new three-bedroom homes with a garden, and available for a \$40 monthly rent.⁹⁷

Other Popular Fronters, including Bouslog, Kanahale, and Saiki, also continued to advocate for labor and civil rights during the 1950s, each according to hard-won principles of

⁹⁴ McElrath, interview by Mast, 313.

⁹⁵ McElrath, interview by Roffman.

⁹⁶ Gordon Y.K. Pang, “Social Activist not slowing down,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, October 30, 1999.

⁹⁷ Monahan, “Hawai’i’s Twentieth Century Working Women,” 225.

radicalism. After the government sentenced two young men to death by hanging for the murder of a white woman in 1948, Bouslog and Kanahale launched a multi-year campaign to repeal the territory's capital punishment statute on the grounds of racial and class disparity. Their combined grassroots activism and Bouslog's legal efforts helped save the men's lives and end the death penalty in the territory in 1957. Several years later Hawai'i's Governor ordered the convicted men paroled.⁹⁸

As a consequence of her representation of the Hawaii Seven during the Smith Act trials, Bouslog found herself fighting to protect her own First Amendment rights, as well as those of all lawyers, in criticizing government officials' actions during ongoing trials. In 1956, the Territorial Bar Association had slapped her with a one-year suspension for disparaging comments she made about the territory's justice system and the FBI during the Labor Day public speech she had given in 1952. In response, she took the Bar Association to court, eventually appealing their decision to the U.S. Supreme Court. In 1959, the Court ruled in a 5-4 decision that lawyers have the right to free speech as long as they do not obstruct justice.⁹⁹

All of these women stayed active in the labor movement, especially during the strikes and protests that took place in the 1950s. Kanahale held multiple leadership roles in the ILWU Women's Auxiliary and in the United Public Workers, including secretary-treasurer, executive board member, and secretary of the union's PAC.¹⁰⁰ Saiki worked for the Oahu County Committee of the Democratic Party, and participated in the ILWU Women's Division.

⁹⁸ Roffman, "Kanahale, Helen Lake," 197; Falk, "Harriet Bouslog," 116.

⁹⁹ Falk, "Harriet Bouslog," 110. The case was *In re Sawyer* 360 U.S. 622 (1959).

¹⁰⁰ Roffman, "Kanahale, Helen Lake," 197.

“Whenever there was any kind of labor dispute, or they needed someone on a picket line,” she told an interviewer, “I was a volunteer for that.”¹⁰¹

In February 1958, after organizing more deliberately for community support and building up a large strike fund, sugar workers went out on the “Aloha Strike,” so named for its “good spirit and community support,” which pre-empted the possibility of a counter-organizing campaign in the style of *We, the Women*.¹⁰² After four months, the employers settled, and the workers won a retirement program, better housing, and improved medical coverage, in addition to wage increases. Pineapple workers, too, continued to mobilize on the job, particularly against production line speed-ups.¹⁰³

By 1965, McElrath was eager for a new adventure, and curious about new theories of social work and sociology. She decided to take a break from the ILWU and fulfill her long-deferred dream of attending graduate school.

A Popular Fronter in Alabama

After more than thirty years of organizing, separated from her husband and with her children grown, McElrath enrolled in a graduate program at the University of Michigan. During one of her first classes, she asked the professor about the program’s connection to community organizing, particularly in the Saul Alinsky model. The professor replied that, as McElrath

¹⁰¹ Rachel Saiki, interview by Robert and Anne Mast, *Autobiography of Protest in Hawaii*, Robert H. and Anne B. Mast, eds., (University of Hawaii Press, 1996), 226.

¹⁰² Beechert, “The Political Economy of Hawaii,” 167.

¹⁰³ “Wahine Workers at Libby Cannery Walk-Out in Speedup Protest,” *Honolulu Record*, February 27, 1958; “Foreladies Crack Down at Libby: Speedup Pressure Returns as Canning Season Approaches,” *Honolulu Record*, May 22, 1958.

remembered it, “we don’t feel that social work can do the rubbing-salt-in-your-wounds concept that Alinsky talks about.”¹⁰⁴ She was not impressed with that answer, but nor would she have completely agreed with Alinsky’s top-down organizing strategy.¹⁰⁵

Yet, she decided to stay with the social work program because it gave her an opportunity to spend three and a half months in Lowndes County, Alabama, one of the civil rights struggle’s centers and the birthplace of the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO). In Lowndes, she became part of radical activism’s legacy in Alabama. Black communists, in particular, were active in Alabama in the 1930s and 1940s.¹⁰⁶ In 1965, local activists in collaboration with members from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) founded the LCFO, which conducted voter registration drives and ran Black candidates for local office. They used the image of a black panther to represent their political party on county election ballots so that voters who could not read could easily identify LCFO candidates.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ McElrath, interview by Mast.

¹⁰⁵ For a comparison of communist-influenced organizing and Alinsky’s model, see McAleve, “The Crisis of New Labor and Alinsky’s Legacy,” 415-441.

¹⁰⁶ For more on this legacy, see Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*; Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights*; Stanton, *Red, Black, and White: The Alabama Communist Party, 1930-1950*.

¹⁰⁷ For more on the LCFO’s political program and its use of the black panther image, see Hasan Kwame Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama’s Black Belt* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 2, 152, 184; Andrew Kopkind, “The Lair of the Black Panther,” *The New Republic*, (August 13, 1966), 10-13. In October 1966, the Black Panther Party, founded in Oakland, California, took its name from the image used by LCFO activists. In Oakland and other cities, Black Panther Party activists led community-based campaigns against police brutality and provided free community service programs (such as health clinics, food pantries, and voter registration). For more on the Black Panther Party’s healthcare activism, see Alondra Nelson, *Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight Against Medical Discrimination*, (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2011).

McElrath arrived in Alabama in May 1966. The social work department at Michigan had provided her with the opportunity to join the “Community Education Program,” a federally funded collaboration between the Tuskegee Institute and Tufts University that recruited “family physicians, medical specialists, nurses, educators, and social workers” to train local residents as “community health assistants” who then could conduct health surveys and primary care examinations at locations in Boston and Alabama.¹⁰⁸ The program attracted a multiracial group of volunteers, including students from universities in Michigan and Massachusetts, United Mine Workers members, and social workers and medical students from the Medical Committee for Human Rights (MCHR). They all spent the summer in Lowndes County, situated south of the midway point between Selma and Montgomery.

Similar to the ILWU, the MCHR had a multiracial group of leaders with histories of radical activism, and deep connections to the labor and the civil rights movements (although unlike the ILWU its members were predominantly white).¹⁰⁹ A few of MCHR’s original founders had joined the CPUSA during the Popular Front, and had stayed active with the Party into the 1960s.”¹¹⁰ In Mississippi and Alabama, MCHR members provided medical support for civil rights workers, often treating those injured during protests. They protested segregation at hospitals, and advocated for community health clinics. “We are deeply concerned with the health

¹⁰⁸ For more on the Community Education Program, see “Tufts to Study Community Health,” *New England Journal of Medicine* 273, no. 7 (August 1965), 395.

¹⁰⁹ For more on the Medical Committee for Human Rights, see John Dittmer, “Medical Committee for Human Rights,” *American Medical Association Journal of Ethics* 16, no. 4 (September 2014): 745-748; John Dittmer, *The Good Doctors: The Medical Committee for Human Rights and the Struggle for Social Justice in Health Care* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009), 256; Nelson, *Body and Soul*, 33-34.

¹¹⁰ Dittmer, *The Good Doctors*, 256.

needs of the socially deprived,” wrote the MCHR founders in 1964, “It is our purpose to initiate activities to improve their health status and to provide professional support and assistance to organizations concerned with human rights.”¹¹¹

After spending several weeks on the Tuskegee campus, McElrath moved in with Mrs. McCall, an African-American domestic worker. McCall and her family lived in a house with no running water, a half-mile from the Haynesville County Jail, where the previous summer a local sheriff’s deputy had murdered civil rights activist Jonathan Daniels after his arrest during a protest in nearby Fort Deposit.¹¹² On McElrath’s first drive down Alabama’s Highway 80, she was “struck by the heavy scent of honeysuckle and magnolia,” reminding her of Hawai’i’s “fragrant plumeria.”¹¹³ She compared the political economy, power structures, and daily lives of Alabama’s African-American residents to her own experiences in Hawai’i.

As a Chinese-American woman from a multiracial society and former colony, she had different experiences of racism and white supremacy than her new neighbors. One white sheriff told the middle-aged McElrath, “You’re a hula-hula girl,” as he tried to place her in the South’s rigid racial hierarchy. “Yes, we’re here to help you in whatever way we can,” he promised after determining her non-Black status.¹¹⁴ “It isn’t that I was unprepared for this kind of difference spawned by centuries of an ideology of white supremacy,” McElrath later wrote for the *ILWU* newspaper. “After all, I had read books of the South; I had seen government reports; I had

¹¹¹ Dittmer, *The Good Doctors*, 62.

¹¹² McElrath, “We gave workers a sense of dignity,” 266.

¹¹³ Ah Quon McElrath, “Sweet Scent of Magnolia and the Stench of Poverty,” *The ILWU Dispatcher*, November 1, 1966.

¹¹⁴ McElrath, “We gave workers a sense of dignity,” 267.

studied the statistics of the Census Bureau; I had seen pictures in magazines and newspapers.”¹¹⁵ All of her intellectual preparation, however, did not lessen her palpable fear of white violence, nor her “anger and shame” as she witnessed segregation and the “evils this division has brought about” up close.¹¹⁶

Over the course of three months, in the midst of LCFO voter registration drives and violent repression against civil rights activists, McElrath and the team of program volunteers and local resident paraprofessionals completed over 2,000 health surveys and examinations in county. They established five education and examination centers, one in an old Volkswagen bus that the United Auto Workers had donated, and performed vital statistics and examinations at the centers, as well as door-to-door health surveys.¹¹⁷ As she observed, Lowndes County’s Black residents had desperate need for routine healthcare, with only two (white) doctors to treat 16,000 people, compared to the average in Hawai’i of one doctor for every 850 patients. The segregated entrances at doctors’ offices and schools, the dilapidated housing, the constant police surveillance that she saw as she traveled from town to town made her appreciate all the more what she and the ILWU had accomplished in Hawai’i. “Nothing short of massive federal and trade union intervention can bring to the South the great society that we boast about so freely,” she warned.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ McElrath, “Sweet Scent of Magnolia.”

¹¹⁶ “Conditions in Alabama Shock Honolulu Woman,” *Honolulu Advertiser*, November 18, 1966.

¹¹⁷ McElrath, “We gave workers a sense of dignity,” 266.

¹¹⁸ McElrath, “Sweet Scent of Magnolia.”

During her work with the “Community Education Program,” McElrath met inspirational leaders and activists, such as LCFO chairman John Hulett, MCHR field director and civil rights activist Alvin Poussaint, and rank-and-file union activists attempting to organize janitors at Auburn University and at a Dan River textile plant.¹¹⁹ The voter registration drives and number of Black candidates running for local office in Lowndes, she wrote, are “heartening, because it points to the great resilience of a group of citizens who have been oppressed for so long.”¹²⁰ Her activities in Alabama inspired her more than her coursework in Michigan, so she did not complete her degree at the university, returning instead to Hawai’i and the battles for civil rights at home.

Popular Front Legacies in the Building of Hawai’i’s Social Welfare State

McElrath returned to Hawai’i from Alabama with renewed energy. As the union’s social worker for the next decade and a half, she collaborated with community organizations, the municipal government, and public and private social service organizations to ensure that union and community members had access to housing, healthcare, and public services. Within the ILWU’s Membership Services and Education Departments, she trained members on the details of their contract benefits, but also on how to navigate government welfare benefits systems. “Part of our educational work was training people on the membership services committee and on the

¹¹⁹ McElrath and Hulett appeared together on a WBAI radio program in January 1967. See *New York Times*, January 22, 1967. For more on the LCFO, see John Hulett, “How the Black Panther Party was Organized,” May 22, 1966, *Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader: Documents, Speeches, and First Hand Accounts* from the Black Freedom Struggle, edited by Clayborne Carson, et al (New York: Penguin, 1991). In 1970, Hulett was elected as county sheriff in Lowndes.

¹²⁰ McElrath, “Sweet Scent of Magnolia.”

education committees to do the work of paraprofessionals,” she recounted to an interviewer in the 1970s. “In other words, we trained a lot of ‘social workers’ without advanced degrees to do this kind of work, because we felt they were the ones who knew the membership.”¹²¹ By the mid-1960s, the ILWU-employer medical plans covered over thirty thousand sugar workers alone.

In April 1966, the ILWU had formed the non-profit Hawaii Council for Housing Action (HCHA) in coalition with the United Public Workers, a number of churches, and the building trades to raise funds and develop low-cost housing for the islands’ working class and elderly. The HCHA secured tens of millions of dollars in federal and donated funding through a public / private collaboration to build housing for the thousands of residents who could not afford the high cost of housing, but who earned too much to qualify for public assistance.¹²² “We formed a private nonprofit housing organization to get federal funds to build a cluster of homes for individuals of low income as well as seniors,” McElrath later recalled. These were material victories, or as she put it, “exciting things that went to the nub of the existence of working people and their families.”¹²³ By 1968, the HCHA had facilitated the building of more than one thousand new low-rent housing units for the elderly. The ILWU continued to utilize government resources for housing and redevelopment projects.¹²⁴

¹²¹ McElrath, interview by Roffman.

¹²² For more on the HCHA see, “Labor, Church Groups Seek Action on Housing,” *Honolulu Advertiser*, April 16, 1966; “Helping the Gap Group,” *Honolulu Advertiser*, April 20, 1966; “Federal Grant to aid Housing for Elderly,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, September 14, 1966; Zalburg, *A Spark is Struck!*, 480-481.

¹²³ McElrath, interview by Schwartz, 22.

¹²⁴ Alf Pratte, “Five Million in Senior Citizen Housing is due,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, September 10, 1968.

During her social work career, McElrath became a sought-after expert on public and private healthcare and employment policies. In 1967, Hawai'i's governor appointed her to the Board of Social Services. "A lot of people don't know the history of the role that we played in bringing healthcare to Hawai'i," she told an interviewer.¹²⁵ The ILWU had launched its campaign for universal healthcare in 1954. The union's emphasis on building political, community, and workplace power led to the state's enactment of progressive legislation, she claimed, "including the Prepaid Health Law, which eventually resulted in near universal health care coverage for Hawaii's population."¹²⁶ The Prepaid law, passed in 1974, required employers to provide healthcare coverage and mandated minimum standards for coverage to any employee who worked for twenty hours or more, which led to near universal coverage in the state. "As an active feminist," wrote one journalist, McElrath's "studies on health care for women received national attention."¹²⁷

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Bouslog and Saiki also remained active in democratic politics, as well as in labor and peace organizing. In 1976, Bouslog led a community-wide effort on behalf of Aiko and John Reinecke, who were still seeking the restoration of their teaching credentials after their 1948 firing under Ruth Black's Commission for Public Instruction. She helped secure reinstatement and a major financial settlement for the couple, forcing the Board of Education to affirm its commitment to free speech in the classroom.¹²⁸ In the 1980s, Saiki visited imprisoned labor leaders from the Philippine's radical Kilosan Maya Uno union in Manila,

¹²⁵ McElrath, interview by Mast, 310.

¹²⁶ McElrath, "From Old to New Plantations," 10.

¹²⁷ Manuel, "Her Bottom Line is Human Rights."

¹²⁸ Reinecke, *A Man Must Stand Up*, iv; Falk, "Harriet Bouslog," 116.

organized with the anti-nuclear movement, and became involved with the Hawaii Union of Socialists.¹²⁹

These Popular Fronters, their collective voice steeled in demanding equal treatment in criminal justice, immigrants' rights, and social welfare legislation from the 1930s onward, made a continual impact on Hawai'i and in U.S. national life. Beyond specific union campaigns, McElrath, Saiki, Bouslog, and Kanahale were often the driving forces behind Hawai'i's social welfare programs, especially for housing and healthcare policies. Throughout her career as a social worker and union organizer, McElrath continued to organize for immigrant rights, gender and racial equality, and a progressive social welfare state, priorities that had remained central to her radical political vision for over fifty years.

In 1981, at age sixty-five, McElrath officially retired from the ILWU, the organization that for almost five decades had provided her, in her own words, with "prestige, status, and recognition for some of the kinds of ability that I have."¹³⁰ Retirement had little meaning in her day-to-day life, however, as she continued to join efforts to make structural changes in America's healthcare and welfare systems. Universal healthcare and public housing became her main concerns in her last decades, as the islands shifted more fully from an agricultural to a service industry economy, and the federal government cut spending on social welfare, chipping away at New Deal and Civil Rights legislation.¹³¹

¹²⁹ Viotti, "Activist Life: Rachel Saiki will be honored."

¹³⁰ McElrath, interview by Roffman, 38. Dorothy Sue Cobble states that having an institutional home allowed left-liberal labor women to create a national conversation, shape political policy, and lead the social feminism movement. See Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement*, 5.

¹³¹ Boyd, "The End of Hawaii's Plantations: Back to the Future?," 100.

From 1983 to 1985, she lived in Washington DC, while working for the Villers Foundation, a non-profit focused on improving healthcare for senior citizens. After returning to Hawai'i, she co-founded the Committee on Welfare Concerns (CWC), a coalition of organizations that mobilized for more resources for public welfare programs, including aid to families with dependent children and to the aged. The CWC successfully lobbied the state legislature in 1988 to change the income level at which public assistance payments were pegged from 50 to 60 percent of the federal poverty rate, then to 62.5 percent in 1999. Several years later, when Hawai'i's Senate held a vote on a proposal to freeze the current levels, McElrath and other CWC members served the politicians a lunch purchased with food stamps on the 62.5 percent budget: a glass of milk, one half of a boiled egg, an apple, and three quarters of a cheese sandwich.¹³² McElrath was well known for her command of research statistics and public policy, but she always translated those figures into the daily experiences of working-class people. The Senate voted down the proposal.

Her reputation as a homegrown civil rights and labor activist continued to grow, and the accolades poured in. In 1985, as part of a sponsored group of union leaders, McElrath travelled to Russia, where she saw "trade unions running research institutes, libraries, day care centers, nutritional cafeterias and progressive alcoholism programs."¹³³ In 1988, the University of Hawaii granted her an honorary doctorate, and appointed her to its Board of Regents. In 1990, Hawai'i's governor appointed her to the state's Blue Ribbon Committee on Healthcare. Joining the Department of Health's director and a number of healthcare providers to discuss changes to the islands' system of healthcare proved to be a frustrating experience for McElrath. They just

¹³² McElrath, interview by Mast.

¹³³ Manuel, "Her Bottom Line is Human Rights."

wanted to “tinker with the system,” she recalled. But she wanted an overhaul, arguing for “single payer, global budgeting, [and] a different means of financing healthcare.” Most of the other committee members, she complained, “could not countenance looking at such a conceptual framework.”¹³⁴

By the mid-1990s, McElrath had become a popular public intellectual and celebrated figure on the islands.¹³⁵ In 1994, she published an essay on Hawai’i’s history of colonialism, racism, and labor structures, dedicating a large chunk of the essay to the number of strikes on the islands’ between 1920 and 1946. Using the famous sugar strike as a case study for a successful labor action, she pointed to the characteristics she thought necessary to build worker power in the future. From creating a democratic, rank-and-file led “industrial union covering all workers regardless of color, race, creed, and job classification,” to engaging in “activities beyond economics, the usual *raison d’etre* of a labor union,” she mapped out the ILWU’s tactics and strategies that not only won the strike, but formed the foundation for Hawai’i’s progressive social and labor legislation. Yet, she also outlined significant challenges to overcome in the state’s tourism-based service economy, and in the “modern-day plantations” of hotels and resorts: racism and xenophobia, wealth inequality, and the decline of progressive politics.¹³⁶

¹³⁴ McElrath, interview by Roffman, 316.

¹³⁵ For examples of the many profiles of McElrath, see Smyser, “A Lifetime of Laboring to Make Hawaii Better;” Karleen Chinen, “Ah Quon McElrath: Fire Still Burns in Veteran Labor Leader,” *Hawaii Herald*, March 1, 1991; Kresnak, William. “Ah Quon—A Name to Respect,” *Honolulu Advertiser*, April 19, 1995; Jon K. Matsuoka, “McElrath a hero, model for social workers,” *Honolulu Advertiser*, December 22, 2008.

¹³⁶ McElrath, “From Old to New Plantations,” 10-11.

In 1999, she published a second essay on Hawai'i's political economy, and the islands' history of immigration and labor policies.¹³⁷ Describing how plantation owners in the late 19th and early 20th century recruited foreign labor and then took advantage of the workers' racial and ethnic differences to maintain labor discipline, she illustrates how the segregation in plantation housing and jobs prevented solidarity across racial and ethnic lines. During the sugar strike of 1946, she demonstrates (although does not mention her own significant role) that rank-and-file ILWU leaders used the independent support systems and cultural identities that had developed within these segregated enclaves first to organize each group and then provide a united front against the employers.

While she never explicitly cites Marxist theories on self-determination in her intellectual work, McElrath echoes Claudia Jones's mid-century statements about the lasting ideologies of white supremacy in American imperialism in her analysis of Hawai'i's political economy. She situates the local labor movement in postcolonial struggles for emancipation, and similarly argues that civil rights legislation and democratic reforms alone will not support a multiracial democracy. "The future is not clear, the present is uncertain," she writes, "and the past has only limited answers to the problems we shall be facing in the next millennium."¹³⁸ But she remained certain that grassroots organizing and multiracial, cross-class mass movements would be central to solving any of those problems.

In the last decades of her life, McElrath continued to use her public platform to tell the history of Hawai'i's immigrant, working-class, grassroots activists and what they had achieved in the American century. She published op-eds in local newspapers, particularly on Labor Day, and

¹³⁷ McElrath, "Race Relations and the Political Economy in Hawai'i."

¹³⁸ McElrath, "Race Relations and the Political Economy in Hawai'i," 84.

appeared on local radio programs and in a number of local documentary films.¹³⁹ In 1992, the AFL-CIO presented her with a national award—almost forty years after the Hawai’i AFL-CIO had kicked her off a state committee.¹⁴⁰ In 2003, nearly sixty-five years after she first began volunteering at the ILWU’s *Voice of Labor* office in Honolulu, the national ILWU presented her with a lifetime honorary membership. In her acceptance speech, she lightly admonished her union for the fact that she was only the third woman to deliver a formal address at its international convention. The other two, Soong Mei-ling (also known as Madame Chiang Kai-shek) and Helen Bentley (U.S. Maritime Commissioner and former maritime reporter), had appeared at conventions in the 1970s. The ILWU had invited Bentley, McElrath joked, “because she could swear as good as the strongest longshoreman.”¹⁴¹

The business and political community celebrated her, too. In 2005, the *Hawaii Business* magazine named her one of the state’s top fifty icons, and the Hawai’i Women’s Legislative Caucus dedicated its legislative agenda to her.¹⁴² These are not typical honors for a lifetime Marxist intellectual and grassroots labor organizer, but McElrath earned them without self-censoring her public criticisms of capital—nor of labor. “This Labor Day should serve,” she wrote in her final editorial in 2008, “as the beginning of the trade union movement’s endeavor to understand where it is going and how it can make improvements in our political and economic

¹³⁹ See, for example, Ah Quon McElrath, “Corporate Giants the Real Enemies,” *Honolulu Advertiser*, March 5, 1995; Ah Quon McElrath, “A Labor Day Look at the Legacy of Hawaii Unions,” *Honolulu Advertiser*, August 31, 1997; *Ah Quon McElrath: making a difference*, DVD (University of Hawaii-West Oahu, Center for Labor Education & Research, 2005).

¹⁴⁰ Manuel, “Her Bottom Line is Human Rights.”

¹⁴¹ Ah Quon McElrath, “Remarks to the International Longshore and Warehouse Union 32nd Convention, 2003,” transcript, AQM Papers at UH.

¹⁴² “50 Hawaii Icons: Ah Quon McElrath,” *Hawaii Business*, (June 2005), 104-105.

system.” The community too, she added, “must do its part by holding industry accountable for corporate irresponsibility and callous treatment of the working class.”¹⁴³ Along with her network of Popular Front women activists, McElrath spent a lifetime engaged in efforts to hold oligarchs, politicians, labor officials, and community leaders accountable to the needs and rights of working people in Hawai’i.

Helen Kanahale died in 1978, Harriet Bouslog in 1998, and Rachel Saiki in 2000. One month after (Hawaiian born) Barack Obama’s historic election to the U.S. presidency, Ah Quon McElrath died at age ninety-two, still holding fast to the political vision and radical ideology that sustained her in the difficult work of confronting capitalism and building democratic social movements.¹⁴⁴ She was the last of this generation in Hawai’i.

Conclusion

“I continue to be a Marxist because I think this is one way of analyzing the world that makes sense,” McElrath told an interviewer in the 1970s, but she added “I don’t mean just Karl Marx, without seeing the changes in the world.”¹⁴⁵ The changes she witnessed and contributed to in Hawai’i over the course of the twentieth century do not represent a steady march of progress from white supremacist oligarchy to multiracial democracy. Nor do they paint a picture of early radicalism tamed or tempered into steady reformism. Instead, McElrath and her generation’s life stories reveal Hawai’i to be a site of continual class, race, and gender conflict. The battles that

¹⁴³ McElrath, “Industry chipping away at gains made by labor,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, September 1, 2008.

¹⁴⁴ Christie Wilson, “Hawai’i Union, Social Activist Ah Quon McElrath Dies at 92,” *Honolulu Advertiser*, December 13, 2008.

¹⁴⁵ McElrath, “The Challenge is Still There,” 150.

these Popular Fronters fought (those they won and lost alike) left a lasting influence on twentieth-century labor, feminist, civil rights, community health, and welfare rights movements, both in Hawai'i and beyond.

In contrast to Claudia Jones and Emma Tenayuca, Ah Quon McElrath never disappeared completely from the public stage in her hometown. Her career with the ILWU provided her with meaningful work and a public platform for decades. But similar to these other Popular Fronters, she had gained new attention from the press in the 1980s. In Hawai'i, local newspapers first described McElrath and her fellow union organizers as “liberal thinkers from many backgrounds,” and as radicals but “with the intent of helping labor, never the intent of helping Russia.”¹⁴⁶ Yet McElrath, even at the height of the Cold War, always insisted on communists' central role in the labor movement's successes. “The labor movement here might never have progressed as it did without such help,” she told a reporter in 1989.¹⁴⁷ The help she referred to was not the Soviet Comintern, but grassroots communist organizers and ILWU leaders she organized alongside for so long.

Historians have yet to take the full measure of McElrath's contributions to the history of Hawai'i's labor and civil rights movements. Gerald Horne recovers the crucial role that communists and other radicals played in the ILWU, but still gives the starring roles in the successful campaigns to ILWU officials, communist longshoremen, and plantation laborers. Although he states that it is “hard to disentangle the success of the union...from the person of the slender, almond-colored A. Q. McElrath,” she remains on the sidelines of his otherwise excellent

¹⁴⁶ Manuel, “Her Bottom Line is Human Rights,” Smyser, “A Lifetime of laboring to make Hawaii better.”

¹⁴⁷ Smyser, “A Lifetime of laboring to make Hawaii better.”

account of Hawai'i's political and economic transformation in the twentieth century. His re-centering of communism is an important contribution, but radical and progressive women, such as McElrath, Saiki, Bouslog, and Kanahele, make only cameo appearances in his history.¹⁴⁸

For decades, McElrath advanced a Popular Front political vision that included calls for robust investment in an anti-racist, pro-immigrant social welfare state. Her intellectual and organizing activities reveal the longevity and durability of a socialist ideology that centered on demands for racial and gender equality and earned her a reputation, to quote the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, as “the conscience of the union, the conscience of the labor movement, the conscience of the legislators.”¹⁴⁹ While she was always known as “the most radical person in the room,” McElrath was part of a Popular Front cohort who shared her commitment to economic justice and civil rights.¹⁵⁰ As she advised this author in 2006, “You organize all of the women, all of the immigrants, all of the gay and liberal and transgender people. You organize everyone you can get your hands on.”¹⁵¹ With an expansive vision of workers grounded in both their workplaces and communities, she challenged new generations of activists to organize.

“Are you willing to carry the torch your ancestors lit for unions,” McElrath had asked the ILWU's convention delegates in 2003—a torch that she had carried, passed on, and taken up

¹⁴⁸ Horne, *Fighting in Paradise*, 92.

¹⁴⁹ Mary Adamski and Susan Essoyan, “Unstoppable Force: The matriarch of Hawai'i's union movement extended her vision across the larger community,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, December 13, 2008.

¹⁵⁰ Michael Tsai, “McElrath's Legacy Lives On,” *Honolulu Advertiser*, March 1, 2009.

¹⁵¹ Ah Quon McElrath, interview by author.

again for over sixty years.¹⁵² In a speech that was as much a history lesson as a call to arms, she listed a set of priorities for the ILWU's current members, and highlighted the role of communists—who had recognized the “needs of workers to be treated with equality and justice regardless of color or creed”—in the labor movement's successes. Only through unions, she told her fellow ILWU members, can the working class “manage to control the conditions of work which defines you and all other workers who produce the goods and services, the art and music, the literature and dance which nourish the human spirit and mind in freedom and love and with equality and justice.”

“Organizing is the life blood of a trade union,” she announced from the podium, and then offered some advice. “Talk union and programs with your neighbors; with parents in your PTA group; with members of your church; with the players on your ball team.” She ended her speech, as she had in conversations, meetings, and negotiations for decades, with a simple question.

“Will you do it?”

¹⁵² Ah Quon McElrath, “A Lesson in History, A Challenge for the Future,” *Voice of the ILWU* 43, no. 8 (October 2003).

Afterword

“Red.” I picked up that nickname in the fall of 1987, my first year at Fairfield University, a Jesuit college in one of Connecticut’s wealthiest suburbs. It was not because I was a communist. During a freshman get-to-know-you event, I described how visiting Moscow’s Red Square and Leningrad’s art collections in the Hermitage Museum on a ten-day tour of the USSR with fifty of my high school classmates the previous winter had been an inspiration for my decision to pursue a double major in history and art history. I had learned more about Romanovs than Bolsheviks, and even skipped Lenin’s Tomb (I regret that now). But a kid from my dorm called me “Pinko” to get a laugh, and in the coming months it was “Red” that stuck.

The joke was about the foreignness of communism, and the nickname—affectionate or otherwise—associated me with that foreignness. My story, after all, described a visit to what Ronald Reagan had recently dubbed the “Evil Empire.” Ironic, then, that my most vivid memory of the Soviet Union remains singing Woody Guthrie’s “This Land is My Land” alongside our Russian student hosts. They knew all the words, of course, in an intended display of Soviet-American friendship. No one mentioned Guthrie’s communism.

The “Red” moniker took on new meaning my sophomore year, when a few days before the 1988 presidential election I attended a Michael Dukakis rally in nearby Bridgeport, one of Connecticut’s poorest cities. After waiting for hours in the overheated, run-down Central High School gym for the Presidential candidate to arrive, I watched as Dukakis received a “Liberal is not a dirty word” T-shirt to celebrate his birthday. I do not remember the content of his speech (except that it included a few words in Spanish), but I can still recall the feeling of standing among the three thousand Black, white, and Hispanic supporters, many with homemade signs. It

was the biggest, and most racially diverse event I had ever attended, but did not seem particularly well organized. My roommate, who had come with me, was the only other Fairfield student I recognized there.

The following morning, I walked into Fairfield's athletics arena for the George H.W. Bush rally. It presented a contrast. Its crowd was much larger, and significantly less diverse. Behind the podium stood dozens of (mostly white) cheering Fairfield students, smartly dressed in their team sports and cheerleader uniforms. The school's jazz and brass bands played a peppy accompaniment. Matching signs distributed by the campaign dominated the crowd. There was at least one homemade placard, but it mocked the Democratic opponent's immigrant ancestry with, "Dukakis?? That's Greek to Me." Everything about the event conveyed the Bush camp's funding advantages, down to the hundreds of red, white, and blue balloons in the rafters.

I left before they dropped. After the Bush victory, word of my attendance at the Dukakis rally got around, rejuvenating my status as a "Red" on a predominantly affluent, Catholic, and Irish-American campus where many students viewed the Democratic Party (particularly its pro-choice stance) as leftist deviancy.

My "Red" epithet—unlike those of the women in this dissertation—never seemed accusatory or threatening to me. Luckily, my other markers of difference from most of my classmates—first in my family to attend college, immigrant from England, non-religious—did not take on nickname forms. "Red" was better than "Limey" would have been. Still, at the time, it identified me somehow as different, and not in an approving way. In this sense, I encountered anticommunism years before I learned anything about communism. It took a long time for my politics to catch up to the nickname.

That process, begun through an engagement with working-class, women's, and indigenous histories, crystallized fifteen years later in New Haven, where I found my own version of the Popular Front. One might say that Yale University radicalized me, not only in the classroom, but also—mainly, even—in the streets. On Labor Day 2003, I participated in a sit-down demonstration to block traffic in a city intersection as part of a strike by the university's unionized workers in UNITE HERE's Locals 34 and 35. In a cross-class, multiracial show of solidarity, politicians, professors, graduate teachers, college students, local residents, and union members from far and wide marched together with Yale's striking employees. Jesse Jackson took arrest that day, too. "This is going to be for economic justice what Selma was for the right to vote," he told a local newspaper.¹ Waiting for police to arrest us, singing "We Shall Overcome" with the crowd that had temporarily stopped in their march to gather around us, I felt a powerful connection to the legacy of the civil rights movement.

It was my second arrest for an act of civil disobedience since I had entered graduate school, and would not be my last. One evening, a few months later, I marched in the December twilight from the Women's Table sculpture in front of the university's main library to a nearby intersection alongside New Haven residents and Yale employees. Behind a banner emblazoned with Rosie the Riveter's image and the slogan, "A Woman's Place is in Her Union," many of us held candles, and carried posters demanding that Yale provide affordable childcare and family healthcare to its employees, more job opportunities for women of color, and union recognition for Yale's graduate teachers and Yale-New Haven Hospital's non-unionized workers. Then one hundred women—community and student leaders, labor activists, professors, politicians, and graduate teachers—stepped onto College Street and blocked traffic in an act of civil

¹ Penelope Overton, "Jackson, Others Cuffed at Yale," *Hartford Courant*, September 2, 2003.

disobedience. It was a moment of cross-class, multiracial, feminist solidarity that I'll never forget.

The clerical, dining hall, and facilities workers at Yale had won their contract fight, securing pensions and wage increases that would dramatically improve their lives. My own union, GESO, did not win recognition during the Locals' campaign, as we had hoped. Instead, a few months before the Locals' strike in the fall, we had lost an election overseen by the League of Women voters. It was a devastating, public failure.²

In the aftermath, UNITE HERE's leadership offered a number of GESO organizers, me included, the opportunity to volunteer for a few weeks with the Culinary Union in Las Vegas. Here again I witnessed multiracial, cross-class community and labor alliances committed to racial, gender, and economic justice, and engaged in democratic politics as a way to build working-class power. On house visits and in workplace cafeterias, I met Ecuadorian women who had led the strike at the Frontier casino, one of the longest in U.S. labor history; Filipina women who, elected as shop stewards, could hold their own, contract in hand, against racist white bosses; and many other working-class leaders.³

The research for this dissertation began, in other words, while I was engaged in labor struggles at university campuses, hotels, casinos, public schools, and sports arenas in the U.S. and Canada. The semesters I dedicated to research, writing, and organizing my fellow graduate teachers; the summers I spent on campaigns with cafeteria workers, casino bellhops, or hotel room attendants. Organizing in New Haven, Las Vegas, Fresno, Philadelphia, Toronto, and

² Steven Greenhouse, "Grad Students Reject Union In Yale Vote," *New York Times*, May 2, 2003.

³ For more on the Culinary Union's Frontier strike, see *One Day Longer: The Story of the Frontier Strike*, directed by Amie Williams, VHS, (Bal-Maiden Films Production, 1999).

Vancouver introduced me to what I would later come to understand as the legacy of Popular Front politics. In these cities, working-class people, many of them non-white and immigrants, gathered in union halls to plot strategies and learn about labor history; in city halls to support calls for progressive legislation; and in each other's homes to build, through painstaking mutual commitment, the kind of solidarity that could challenge racism, sexism, and capitalism.

At the time I would not have supposed the movements of the 2000s to be so closely connected to the legacy of the Popular Front. The existing scholarship on Jones, Tenayuca, and McElrath in some ways supported the notion that McCarthyism had silenced their voices, and that their communism had driven them into exile or off the public stage and into irrelevance, only to be rediscovered as civil rights heroines decades later. The common refrain that class politics dominated the 1930s and 1940s but was replaced by "identity politics" in the 1960s and 1970s seemed to conceal both their early years of organizing for race and gender justice as well as their later critiques of capitalism. Yet once I widened my lens to include their whole lives, not just their moments of fame or infamy, I could perceive the consistency of their political visions.

The more I learned about these women's lives, labors, and ideas, the more I saw their vestiges in my own time. Ah Quon McElrath planted the most fruitful seeds of this dissertation (and offered organizing advice) during our hours of conversation in Honolulu over a few days in the summer of 2006. Less than a year later, I withdrew from graduate school to take a full time job with UNITE HERE, but continued to read and think about her and the other two women. Their lives had captured my imagination. On my desk at home (first in New Haven, and then in York, England) remained photographs of the three: Tenayuca behind bars in the San Antonio jail after her arrest during a sit-down demonstration in 1937; Jones next to Martin Luther King, Jr. at

the Africa House in London in 1961; and McElrath in front of a blackboard during her labor history class for ILWU members in the 1980s.

My intuition about the parallels between their activism and that of the labor-community coalitions (and the attempts to undermine those coalitions) I had witnessed in multiple cities only grew stronger after the 2008 financial collapse. As the first Director of New Haven Works—a program won through collective bargaining by Locals 34 and 35 in 2012 to address New Haven resident unemployment in collaboration with Yale and the city of New Haven (whose local officials included a number of Yale union members)—I saw the devastating consequences of the economic collapse, particularly for working-class people of color. I also saw the power that multiracial, cross-class, community-labor alliances could wield, even against an employer committed to anti-unionism, and a liberal city administration long in the habit of practicing austerity politics.⁴

Jones, Tenayuca, and McElrath would have recognized such alliances and their challenges in an instant. When I returned to my research after moving to the United Kingdom in 2015, I was finally able to substantiate those intuitive parallels between Popular Frontism in its original historical context and its continued vibrancy in the type of movements I had joined. These women *had* maintained a lifelong communist-influenced politics, their Popular Front visions expressed in diaries, letters, published essays, and oral histories. With Brexit and Trumpism—and those movements’ attendant anti-radicalism, nationalism, and white

⁴ For discussions of electoral politics and community-labor alliances in New Haven see, David Huysen, “The Triumph in New Haven: The Labor-Community Alliance that Defeated the Yale-Democratic Party Establishment,” *New Labor Forum* 21, no. 2 (Spring 2012), 67-75; Sumanth Gopinath, “Community Organizing and Economic Development in the University-Hospital City,” *Work & Culture* 3 (2005). For similar iterations that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, see Mandi Isaacs Jackson, *Model City Blues: Urban Space and Organized Resistance in New Haven* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008).

supremacy—as the backdrop to the writing of these chapters, the consequences of erasing the histories of radical movements that addressed racial, gender and class justice became clearer to me.

Red Lives: A Recovery, Not Just a Celebration

At a time when popular discourses on socialism, Marxism, and white supremacy have returned in force to the North Atlantic public sphere, the full histories of radical and antiradical traditions in the United States and beyond take on renewed significance.⁵ The lives and labors of these three women expand the temporal and geographic scope of these histories, allowing us to recognize the connections between Popular Frontism and the politics of our own day. All three of the women in “Red Lives” withstood state and vigilante violence, poverty and joblessness, and racism and sexism in their own organizations, but throughout their lives remained politically engaged and never stopped identifying as Marxists or socialists.

Toward the end of the Cold War, organizers and academics rediscovered these women as inspirations—for both new social justice activists and scholars in emerging intellectual fields of Black, Chicano/a, Asian American and Women’s Studies. In the 1970s and 1980s, labor historians and civil rights activists recorded oral histories with Tenayuca and McElrath, their

⁵ See, for example, these recent examples from across the political spectrum, Sarah Jaffe, “The Unexpected Afterlife of American Communism,” *New York Times*, June 6, 2017; Corey Robin, “The New Socialists,” *New York Times*, August 24, 2018; Bret Stephens, “Democratic Socialism is Dem Doom,” *New York Times*, July 7, 2018; Ellen Carol Du Bois, “Overlooked No More: Eleanor Flexner, Pioneering Feminist in an Anti-Feminist Age,” *New York Times*, October 16, 2020; Nelson George, “Angela Davis Still Believes America Can Change,” *New York Times*, October 19, 2020.

questions centering on the women's 1930s and 1940s activism.⁶ In the late 1980s, three accounts of Jones's life appeared in London: a collection of remembrances and re-printings of her writings, a pamphlet by a local Black women's group, and a documentary that aired on the BBC.⁷ The stories of these working-class women's organizing had found new traction.

Yet the retellings of their stories (often for more mainstream liberal audiences) have downplayed their lifelong commitment to a communist-inspired, Popular Front politics, while the previous accusations of anti-Americanism they faced have transformed into tributes of their labor on behalf of allegedly American (and in Jones's case, British) values of equal opportunity and liberty. The overlapping Cold War and neoliberal eras have de-radicalized their life histories, and reduced their complex theories and praxes of race, gender, and class to a brand of feisty liberalism.

In the twenty-first century, Jones, Tenayuca, and McElrath are all publicly celebrated as civil rights heroines. In 2008, the British Royal Mail service issued a stamp to celebrate Jones as a "Civil Rights Activist" in its series honoring "Women of Distinction."⁸ The San Antonio city government erected a public marker in 2011 to remember Tenayuca as a "prominent leader of a movement that fought deplorable working conditions, discrimination and unfair wages on behalf

⁶ See, for example, Tenayuca, interview by Turner; Tenayuca, interview by Zamora; Tenayuca, interview by Torres; Tenayuca, interview by Poyo; McElrath, interview by Roffman.

⁷ Tyson and the Camden Black Sisters, *Claudia Jones; Claudia Jones*, dir. Lewis. American communist Angela Davis also included a short biography of Jones in her collection, *Angela Davis, Women, Race, & Class* (New York: Random House, 1981).

⁸ Erik McDuffie interprets the Jones postal stamp as indicative of a "liberal, 'post-racial' discourse that seeks to elide the violent history of colonialism, white supremacy, and anti-Communist repression." See, McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*, 213.

of the city's working poor.”⁹ Hawai'i's Republican governor, in 2008, issued a statement esteeming McElrath's “tireless efforts to improve the lives of Hawai'i's residents.”¹⁰ This latter-day wave of liberal praise for exceptional individuals who helped impoverished communities has all but washed away the women's “Red” sobriquets.

“Red Lives” reclaims the importance of radicalism in the lives of those who fought for ostensibly liberal rights in the modern civil rights and women's movements. When Jones, Tenayuca, and McElrath fought against racial and ethnic discrimination and segregation in housing, education, relief aid, and immigration policies in New York/London, Texas, and Hawai'i, they did so as communists or Marxists. Their radical politics drove their organizing and intellectual work in service of racial and gender equity at least as much as it did their dedication to economic justice. Ultimately, their Popular Front consciousness remained steady, and they always found new ways to engage in politics and social movements.

For their actions on picket lines and in mass demonstrations, as well as for their political beliefs and writings on civil liberties and social justice, these women endured FBI surveillance, government subpoenas, and physical threats from vigilantes. None of it broke them. Their Popular Frontism outlasted their CPUSA membership in part because their commitment to a radical analysis of self-determination and human potential defined their individual relationships to communist politics more than their loyalty to the CPUSA. It outlasted the state's relentless attempts to suppress it in part because those attempts simply confirmed the Popular Fronters'

⁹ The Texas Historical Commission erected the marker in 2011, photograph in possession of the author; Elaine Ayala, “Marker to Honor Labor Leader,” *San Antonio Express-News*, December 20, 2011.

¹⁰ Christie Wilson, “Hawaii Union, Social Activist Ah Quon McElrath Dies at 92,” *Honolulu Advertiser*, December 13, 2008.

“ruthless critique” (to borrow from Marx) of the American status quo. Through their organizing and intellectual endeavors, these women threatened the racial capitalist patriarchy of that status quo. Their shared commitment to Popular Frontism enhanced American democracy in demonstrable ways while eliciting violent opposition from those posing as defenders of that democracy.

Despite multiple setbacks and losses, Claudia Jones, Emma Tenayuca, and Ah Quon McElrath did not disappear from struggles for civil rights, women’s equality, and economic justice in the post-war and Cold War periods. Each, in her own way, stayed committed to re-making the world. The interwoven story of these Popular Fronters’ organizing and intellectual lives demonstrates the longevity and broad geography of a left politics centered on race, gender, and class starting in the 1930s and lasting into the twenty-first century. It also highlights the way that accusations of communism have consistently masked white supremacist and sexist attacks on the non-white and women leaders of Popular Front-style movements for racial, gender, and economic justice. As “Red Lives” underscores, the contemporary turn toward democratic socialism and deep organizing is not a spontaneous combustion in reaction to neoliberalism’s most recent failures, but rather the embers of Popular Front visions—nurtured and maintained for the better part of a century—beginning to re-ignite.

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