



The North Meridian Review

Manuscript 1099

Full

North Meridian Review Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/thenorthmeridianreview>



THE
NORTH
MERIDIAN
REVIEW

FALL 2022 VOLUME 3 ISSUE 1

A JOURNAL OF CULTURE AND SCHOLARSHIP

THE NORTH MERIDIAN REVIEW:
A JOURNAL OF CULTURE AND SCHOLARSHIP

ESTABLISHED 2019

EDITORIAL STAFF

Founding and Managing Editor: Wesley R. Bishop, *Jacksonville State University*

Assistant Editor: Robin Marie Averbeck, *California State University, Chico*

Assistant Editor: Janine Giordano Drake, *Indiana University Bloomington*

Assistant Editor: Paula Ashe, *Purdue University*

Assistant Editor: Lama Sharif, *Purdue University*

Copy Editor: Cynthia Gwynne Yaudes, *Indiana University Bloomington*

Book Review Editor: Alzbeta Hajkova, *Georgia Institute of Technology*

Digital Editor: Cale Erwin, *Butler University*

Poetry Editor: Ricardo Quintana-Vallejo, *Rhode Island College*

EDITORIAL BOARD

Andrea Adomako, *New York University*

Saladin Ambar, *Rutgers University*

Ryan Burns, *Jacksonville State University*

Michelle Campbell, *University of Michigan*

Valentina Concu, *Universidad del Norte*

LaShawnda Crowe Storm, *IUPUI- The Polis Center*

Sarah Ellis, *Jacksonville State University*

John Enyeart, *Bucknell University*

Nancy Gabin, *Emeritus-Purdue University*

Iridessence, *Activist and Artist*

Pádraig Lawlor, *Canterbury Preparatory School, CT*

Michelle Moyd, *Indiana University Bloomington*

Andy Oler, *Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University*

Patricia Oman, *Hastings College Nebraska*

Bessie Rigakos, *Marian University Indianapolis*

Richard Schneirov, *Emeritus-Indiana State University*

Carina Shero, *Activist and Artist*

Kimberly Southwick-Thompson, *Jacksonville State University*

Harry Targ, *Emeritus-Purdue University*

Mauve Perle Tahat, *Indiana University of Pennsylvania*

Julia Tigner, *Jacksonville State University*

Naomi R. Williams, *Rutgers University*

Victoria Saker Woeste, *Independent Scholar*

Ruisheng Zhang, *Tsinghua University*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction..... Wesley R. Bishop, Managing Editor, pp. 5-6.
Preface to Special Issue..... Harry Targ, Guest Editor, pp. 7-11.

Scholarship:

“Daughter of Orion”.....Ellen M. Taylor, pp. 14-42.

Special Issue:

“Nothing Sweet”.....Doug Morris, pp. 46-67.

“New York City’s Composers’ Collective”.....Julia Schmidt-Pirro, pp.68-105.

“Behind the Curtain”.....BJ Bruther, pp. 106-125.

“Insurgent Publishing for the Resistance”.....Timothy Sheard, pp.126-134.

Art:

“Photo Essay”..... Iridessence / Essence Walker, pp.138-154.

“Robot and Dog”..... Wesley R. Bishop, pp. 155.

Poetry:

“Constantine”.....David Milley, pp.159.

“Woman Singing”.....Nancy Cook, pp.161-162.

“Woman’s Work”.....Nancy Cook, pp.163-165.

“Toy Train”.....Ilona Hegedűs, pp.167.

“Untitled”.....Ricardo Quintana-Vallejo, pp.169.

Reviews:

Extended Review: “Democracy as a Struggle and Commitment”.....
.....Susan Curtis, pp.172-181.

Extended Review: William F. Buckley Was Not a Good Man.....
.....Robin Averbeck, pp.182-194.

Film Review: “Black Political Ideology and Identityt.....
.....Valeria Sinclair-Chapman and Andrea Y. Simpson, pp.195-200.

Film Review: “More than a Historical Narrative of One of America’s Most Notorious Trials
.....Yesmina Khedir, pp.201-207.

Film Review: “Art, the State, and Civil Rights”.....
.....Juanita Crider, pp.208-212.

Film Review: A Badge is Scarier than a Gun.....
.....Mark Latta, pp.213-216.

Book Review: “The Peacemaker’s Path”.....
.....Charlie Wiles, pp.217-218.

Book Review: “The Good Hand”.....
.....John Lepley, pp.219-221.

Contributor Bios.....pp.223-227.

INTRODUCTION: FALL 2022

WESLEY R. BISHOP

Dear reader, it is once again my pleasure to be writing to you from the editor's desk at *North Meridian Review*. It has been an eventful year. First, I am no longer located in Indianapolis, and, as such, the journal has moved to the new institution of Jacksonville State University (JSU) in northeast Alabama. Although we are no longer located in the heart of the Midwest, we remain committed to publishing work in scholarship and the arts. I am hoping we will receive greater institutional backing from JSU that will only improve our editing and publishing processes. Secondly, *NMR* is still, as of this year, a fully independent journal. Last year I entered into negotiations with a potential publisher to purchase *NMR*. I was enthused that this new affiliation would increase our budgets and readership, and I was particularly excited that this new publisher promised to be an anti-racist and social justice-oriented publishing house. Yet in the summer I began to see warning signs from several different angles. Previous writers and editors associated with the publisher began contacting me with warnings that there were problems of unfulfilled contracts, verbal harassment, and unprofessionalism. In the fall, when the publisher's owner took to Twitter to engage in homophobic and racist rants, I knew that *NMR* as a publication could not possibly enter into any agreements with the outfit.

Fortunately, we at *NMR* were able to pull our journal from them, and we have ceased any contact or collaboration with their publisher's leadership. The biggest issue for *NMR*, though, was that this whole escapade set us drastically behind schedule. Coupled with my move and health

concerns, we were delayed several months. All of this has been a sobering lesson that in the age of neo-liberal slogans, “anti-racism” and “social justice” can often mean nothing more than neon-like verbiage used by actors of bad faith to sell something.

Fittingly, our fall issue this year focuses heavily on the theme of social justice and art. Professor emeritus Harry Targ of Purdue University joins us as a guest editor, and many of the pieces contained herein are from his careful selection and editing. We also have several other pieces that reflect the diverse nature of the fall issue. This includes a scholarly article by Ellen Taylor, an essay from BJ Bruther, and reviews from Robin Averbeck, Charlie Wiles, and John Lepley. Lastly, we are excited to add a new section this year— Art. Iridessence/Essence Walker joins us as our first artist-in-residence, and her photo essay on race, fat liberation, and modeling enriches this volume immensely.

As always, dear reader, the *North Meridian Review* remains a humanities journal for the humane in these inhumane times. Enjoy our fall issue. We look forward to the many more to come.

Wesley R. Bishop
Founding and Managing Editor
North Meridian Review
Jacksonville State University
Northeast Alabama

POLITICS AND CULTURE: INEXTRICABLE CONNECTIONS: SPECIAL ISSUE

HARRY TARG

Why Should We Think about the Arts and Social Change

Generations of Wobblies, labor activists, anti-war activists, anti-racist and feminist activists have been animated in their vision and their action by music, mural images, powerful novels, and poetry. While this is a truism for almost all activists, there has been less theorizing about the importance of the arts and culture in the inspiration for and the actions around social movements. More importantly, theories of social and political movements rarely provide tactical guidance for movement activists about the importance of political culture and the “use” of the arts in building for social change. We hope that the essays below, the film reviews, the descriptions of how impactful literature has been, and the poetry can help rectify weaknesses in the literature. The writing in this issue covers questions including how important the arts are for building vibrant social movements and how can movement activists efficaciously “use” the arts for social change.

Theorizing about Social and Political Movements

Social science paradigms have for years been constructed around ideas about political and economic systems, class structures, dominant political institutions, and ideological justifications for these. Less attention has been paid to popular forces and the dialectical connections between the systems of control and resistance to them. The 1960s spawned, however, a rethinking of paradigms that historically have explained how societies maintain themselves and change. In the field of history, Howard Zinn, in his *People’s History of the United States*, developed and popularized an argument previously buried in history and social science that history is made by

masses of people, not just elites, and these masses often come together in movements to demand change. “Top-down” history must be complemented by “bottom-up” history.

Paralleling the emergence of the new social, political, and labor history of the 1960s and beyond was a plethora of writings in sociology and political science on social movements. Many of these theories sought to highlight the central causes of the emergence of social movements, who were likely to be participants, and for how long these movements survived and what were the achievements of these movements.

With the development of social movement theory, distinctions were made between “collective behavior” and social movements. Among these, most importantly, was the argument that social movements are organized expressions of dissent and demands for change. Some theorists emphasize why people participate in social movements, including “relative deprivation.” Participants see that they are being unfairly treated and at certain points, perhaps sparked by particular events, join together. Other theories emphasize “resource mobilization.” Given discontent, movements emerge when finances, organizations, and group capacities make such movements possible. Still other theorists emphasize the political process: the level of organization of groups demanding change, their level of optimism about the prospects for change, and concrete contexts for making such changes. An anti-war campaign obviously is more likely to be successful during a war. So-called new social movement theories emphasized uprisings; the expressions of outrage at a cruel and unequal world; growing concerns about racism, economic inequality, and the declining legitimacy of political institutions; and recognition of class exploitation, racism, patriarchy, environmental devastation, colonialism, and imperialism. New social movement theories have emphasized mobilizations of grassroots, often-cooperative behavior. Indeed, the twenty-first century has witnessed the rise of new social movements across the globe.

Political Culture

In the 1960s political scientists introduced two concepts to help explain how and why members of a polity develop their world views and how these views become an operant personal philosophy of political life. The first concept was “political socialization,” addressing the processes by which we learn about our immediate community and the culture at large. Research showed that people learned, for the most part, to respect their political institutions, political figures, and the processes of governance that dominate their lives. People learn about all this in the home, at school, in the media, and among reference groups. The research tended to show that people “learn their politics” at an early age, and not much changes. (Much of the research was based on data before the upheavals of the 1960s.)

The second concept was largely content based: the idea of “political culture.” Political culture referred to the pattern of beliefs, symbols, and myths that dominate whole societies. Therefore, from the vantage point of stability, the task of societies and political systems was to “teach” the dominant political culture to the citizenry.

These two influential concepts in the literature of political science emphasized implicitly, if not explicitly, the maintenance of the status quo. And paralleling the dominant historical narratives discussed above, stability was the motif of academic theorizing. As the theories of social movements suggest, people sometimes come together to demand change, and, as Zinn has told us, that history is really the struggle between those who want to maintain systems as they are and those who seek change.

Enter the Arts

While social movement theorists—historians, sociologists, political scientists—have a lot to contribute both to the understandings of and participation in social movements, the role of the arts and culture are unexamined as educators, entertainers, advocates, and inspirations for social/political mobilization. We can extrapolate from the survey above a number of critical variables about social and political movements: a recognition of inequality, a sense of the possibilities of social organization, knowledge of political institutions and their utility, and the need and propensity to come together as communities. In short, critical elements of social/political movements are education, participants building common organizations, inspiring solidarity, and constructing alternative political cultures that justify organizing.

If we carefully deconstruct moments of social movement history, in the United States progressive populist movements, the Industrial Workers of the World, the women's suffrage movement, and in the organization of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in the 1930s and the Civil Rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s, *the arts have served as educational, motivational, inspirational, and organizing tools*. In short, the arts and culture are critical tools of political socialization and the development of alternative or resistance political cultures. And some activists who have self-defined as cultural performers saw their contribution to political activity as the production of their arts. This volume assumes that *there is an inextricable connection between social/political movements and the arts and culture*.

This Volume

The materials below discuss this fundamental proposition. The article by Susan Curtis reflects on and modifies the groundbreaking work of Michael Denning, who connected economics, politics, and culture in the 1930s. The next two essays, by Doug Morris and Julia Schmidt-Pirro, build on

the ideas of a “cultural front” to describe connections between folk, classical, and popular musics and the radical movements for change in the 1930s. All three authors speculate on how the progressive political culture of the 1930s lived on and influenced politics and the arts in subsequent decades. While the emphasis in these articles is on music, parallel developments in progressive political culture can be found in drama, such as the theater productions of the Federal Theatre Project; the novels of John Steinbeck, Michael Gold, and Richard Wright; the photography of the Works Project Administration; and the great social-realist paintings by such artists as Thomas Hart Benton, Jacob Lawrence, and Diego Rivera. Similar constellations could be identified in later periods such as the 1960s and the current period, in which socialist politics have seen a renaissance.

While the essays in the first section highlight music, in the second section the experiences of book publishing and distribution are reflected in the descriptions by Tim Sheard about his working-class press. And section three analyzes filmmaking, as commentators assess the impacts and value of recent movies addressing racism and anti-war activities. Finally, the volume “lets the poets speak,” with examples of poems that address class, race, and gender issues.

As the inspirational political activist and singer Pete Seeger quoted from his singing partner, Lee Hays, about the connection between political movements and culture:

*Good singing won't do;
Good praying won't do;
Good preaching won't do;
But if you get them all together
With a little organizing behind it,
You get a way of life
And a way to do it.”¹*

¹ Peter Seeger and Bob Reiser, *Carry it On! A History in Song and Picture of the Working Men and Women of America*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), pg. 10.

*THE
NORTH
MERIDIAN
REVIEW*

A HUMANITIES JOURNAL FOR THE HUMANE
DURING INHUMANE TIMES.

SCHOLARSHIP

DAUGHTER OF ORION:
HENRY BESTON'S PROGENY, KATE BARNES

ELLEN M. TAYLOR

Abstract: Henry Beston is well known for his seminal book, The Outermost House, and other works about the environment and his quest for an earth-centered life. His daughter, Kate Barnes, is a celebrated poet in Maine, where she published three collections of poems and served as the state's first poet laureate. In this article, I discuss the complicated relationship between Beston and Barnes, articulated in letters and poetry. Barnes refers to her rich literary genealogy (her mother was the prolific writer Elizabeth Coatsworth) in many of her works, but those poems that mine the depths of her relationship with her father are among the most complex in subject and image. Three principal themes emerge in these poems: Beston's filial regret at having two daughters and no sons; Barnes's use of mythology to reframe her family narrative; and her celestial kinship with her father. We can see in her last published collection, Kneeling Orion, a father-daughter tension that is partially resolved.

When Kate Barnes, Maine's first poet laureate, died in spring 2013, she left a legacy as a poet and beloved mentor to many. The daughter of the celebrated writers Henry Beston and Elizabeth Coatsworth, Barnes was buried at the family homestead of Chimney Farm, her modest grave marker beside Beston's massive rock and Coatsworth's small ceramic fox and flat stone. To many, this grave site was a somber reminder of how Barnes languished under her father's literary shadow.

Much of Barnes's poetic oeuvre echoes her parents' appreciation of ecology, rhythms of rural life, and rituals of northern seasons. The weight of her parental lineage also informs much of her work, collected in three books of poems published after her parents' deaths. These verses show a childhood marred by an emotionally distant father, a lonely adolescence at boarding school, a personal trajectory which arcs to an abusive marriage and finally to a voice informed by the

burgeoning women's movement and ecological sensitivities of the 1970s and beyond. Throughout, her work is grounded in environmental concerns and a deep sense of place and self.

This article discusses literary connections and the familial challenges between Beston and Barnes. First, I will provide background on Henry and his paternal role, including his epistolary relationship with Kate as a child. Next, Kate's schoolgirl letters to her parents, and later adult letters to her friend and principal confidant¹ show the evolution in her thinking about her lineage. These relationships are later explored in her poetry. Three principal themes emerge: (1) Beston's filial regret at having two daughters and no sons; (2) Barnes's use of mythology to reframe her family narrative; and (3) her celestial kinship with her father. We can see in her final published work, *Kneeling Orion*, a father-daughter tension that is partly resolved.

Beston as Father

Henry Beston rose to fame as a celebrated writer of *The Outermost House* in 1928. He was forty years old, Harvard University-educated, and had served as an ambulance driver in France during World War I. The success of his book fueled his passion for a simpler life, away from the city and even the suburbs, to a rural community in Maine. He would find similar values in his life partner, Elizabeth Coatsworth.

The two writers cultivated an exquisite epistolary relationship for over ten years before they married in 1929. She was thirty-six, and he was forty-one, both relatively mature for a first

¹ Eleanor Mattern was a close friend to whom Kate Barnes wrote several letters a week for over a dozen years, reflecting on her life and work. Upon Barnes's death in 2013, the letters were archived at the Maine Women Writers Collection (MWWC) in Portland. The author of this article had access to that material in the summer of 2016. In the fall of 2016, the archive was closed until the death of Barnes's children, to protect personal information. The MWWC granted permission to use the material gathered during the initial period of open access.

marriage at that time. Coatsworth had traveled the world and achieved literary success in her own right. Like Beston, she was drawn to the rhythms of nature and rural communities in harmony with the land. These themes informed much of her work.

Beston was firmly set in his ways when he married. The arrival of children marked a significant change in the household and his daily routines. Henry had been working on a follow-up text to the *Outermost House*; his new book would explore the ponds and bay regions of the inner Cape Cod. However, “all literary work ceased at the end of June, with the birth of Beston’s first child, Margaret Coatsworth Beston, on July 2, 1930.”² The child’s needs occupied the new parents during the summer, and in the fall, Henry returned to the cape, while Elizabeth and baby Meg moved to the Coatsworth family home in Hingham, Massachusetts.

Domestic life did not slow down Elizabeth, and she soon finished her award-winning children’s book, *The Cat Who Went to Heaven*.³ Yet Henry struggled to gain traction with his writing. He was restless when in the suburbs, and on a trip to visit an old friend in Maine that winter, he discovered his future farm on Damariscotta Lake. As Elizabeth remembers it, “Henry took me out to lunch in Quincy. I remember that we ordered fish sticks (for Henry, haddock was the only fish that existed). ‘How would you like to have us buy a Maine farm?’ he asked at the end of the meal, and I said, also in a split second, ‘It sounds fine.’ A few weeks later we bought the property.”⁴

The farm included eighty-eight acres of hay fields, iconic stone walls, woodlands, and it abutted Deep Cove on the shores of Damariscotta Lake. The house had been built in 1835 and

² Daniel G. Payne, *Orion on the Dunes: A Biography of Henry Beston* (Boston: David R. Godine Publisher, 2016), 185.

³ Elizabeth Coatsworth, *The Cat Who Went to Heaven* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1958).

⁴ Elizabeth Coatsworth, ed., *Especially Maine: The Natural World of Henry Beston from Cape Cod to the St. Lawrence* (Brattleboro, VT: Stephen Green Press, 1970), 6.

needed contemporary updates.⁵ Yet the rusticity was part of the attraction. With the purchase of the property, Henry and Elizabeth joined the literary rusticators who left urban and suburban homes to find renewal in nature. Their urban flight helped launch the modern environmental movement that spread through much of New England.⁶ The property, which they named Chimney Farm, would become the background of their writing, their marriage, and their children's formative years.

In September of 1931, Elizabeth was pregnant again, and on April 9, 1932, Kate was born. Henry writes in a letter, "'tis another lass, a strong lively pretty child."⁷ Often called "Puss," she developed into a cheerful baby. In another letter, Henry writes, "the Puss-cats remains just as she always was, the best and most genial of babies. The protests (and they are vigorous) seem to be almost entirely confined to occasions when somebody is being fed and she hasn't yet had her share."⁸ In 1932, with a toddler Meg in hand, and baby Kate in a "market basket padded and lined with rose-sprigged dimity"⁹, the couple moved to their farm in Damariscotta, Maine, and set up house for the summer.

The household was fiscally solvent from Coatsworth's prolific literary output, and during the summers that followed Henry and Elizabeth hired help for the girls. Though Henry wasn't expected to braid hair or arrange doll house furniture, he lamented that he wasn't blessed with sons: he writes to his friend Luther Nuff (who had just had two boys), "I envy you a bit for we should both like a pair of boys to go with the pair of daughters." He had joked before his wedding

⁵ Payne, *Orion on the Dunes*, 193.

⁶ Dale E. Potts, "Community within Nature: Culture and Environment in the Chimney Farm Literature of Henry Beston and Elizabeth Coatsworth, 1944–48," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 18, no. 4 (Autumn 2011): 820–39, doi: 10.1093/isle/isr105.

⁷ Payne, *Orion on the Dunes*, 197

⁸ *Ibid.*, 208.

⁹ Elizabeth Coatsworth, *Personal Geography* (Brattleboro, VT: Stephen Green Press), 110.

that he and Elizabeth would “cross the bridges of matrimony ‘like Tudors – Henry and Elizabeth’” who had two girls and two boys.¹⁰ Yet Beston and Coatsworth had no sons.

Reading and writing were valued in the Beston-Coatsworth household. Barnes later honored her mother for introducing her to literature: “*I’ve had a great luxury in my life. I was brought up hearing a great deal of poetry thanks to my mother, who read aloud an enormous amount. And read lots of story poems to the children, exciting ones.*”¹¹ Coatsworth becomes a muse for Barnes’s later work, a cool pool into which she frequently dipped.¹² Her father’s influence, however, was more like fire.

Kate’s exposure to poetry was in stereo. Not only did her mother read to her and model daily writing at the kitchen table but Henry composed limericks and sent them to his daughters as postcards when he traveled to Cape Cod and across New England gathering material for a new book. Below is one such limerick, written to Kate in 1938:¹³

For Daddy’s Puss

There was a young lady of Zamp
who when in a temper did stamp
she’d kick and she’d yell,
‘til they rang the town bell,
just to quiet this person of Zamp.

Based in this creative artifact and others like it, Henry appears amused by his daughter’s willful temperament. While he spent time planning renovations at Chimney Farm in the fall and

¹⁰ Payne, *Orion on the Dunes*, 210.

¹¹ Kate Barnes, *Words from the Frontier: Poetry in Maine*, accessed September 1, 2015, <http://www.poetryinmaine.org/barnes.php>.

¹² I explore the relationship between Elizabeth Coatsworth and her daughter, Kate Barnes, in “Personal Geographies: Poetic Lineage of American Poets Elizabeth Coatsworth and Kate Barnes,” *ELOPE: English Language Overseas* 13, no. 2 (2016): 111–27, doi: 10.4312/elope.13.2.111-127.

¹³ Postcard from Henry Beston to Kate Barnes, 1938, folder “November 14, 1938–January 2, 1939,” box 2, Beston Family Papers (George J. Mitchell Department of Special Collections & Archives, Bowdoin Library, Brunswick, ME).

winter of 1938, Elizabeth stayed with the children in Hingham, Massachusetts, and he wrote her daily.

Later, Kate attended the private Derby School in Hingham and stayed with her Aunt Maggie (Elizabeth's older sister) and Uncle Morton Smith while her parents traveled or spent time at the farm. When the children returned home for the summer, Henry remarked on Kate's growth: At twelve, in 1944, she was only a few inches shorter than her 5'11" mother. Henry writes, "Pussy is as husky as a future Knight-Commander of the Amazons. She's the lass who'll help me move the stove and dig up these State of Maine rocks! She's more Latin than Meg, and looks Latin, I think: Michelangelo would have had her for a model any day. Alas, that she was not a fine husky boy!"¹⁴ Beston's lament for boys continues.

With the children away at school in the 1940s, Henry worked on essays for *The Progressive*. He was outraged by the eruption of another war, and much of his energy and attention was channeled into letters to editors, friends, and occasional essays. He ranted about the occupation of France "as foolish as it is evil"; the Allied bombing of civilian targets was, he said, deplorable. "I think we have seen, these last few days, the single most appallingly wicked act in all our savage human history," Beston wrote after the Allied bombers attacked Berlin. He lamented "the virtual obliteration" and the massacre of some thirty thousand civilians, the devastating trajectory of the war, and the general malaise of the modern world. The Boston suburban town of Hingham no longer interested him, even for short visits: "the suburb drives me nuts. There is no nature for a naturalist to see, there are no birds save 'the spotted Chevrolet and the Greater and

¹⁴ Payne, *Orion on the Dunes*, 260.

Lesser Buick.”¹⁵ Henry spent less and less time in Hingham, and more at Chimney Farm or traveling in search of material to document the fading majesty of the natural world.

Kate’s childhood was one of both educational privilege and parental absence: dexterous reading and writing were expected, and she mastered both skills early. Henry had attended a private school, Adams Academy in Quincy, Massachusetts, as did his father and brother. This may account for his insistence that his daughters too, attend private schools. At age thirteen, Kate was sent to Emma Willard, an exclusive boarding school for girls in Troy, New York.

In a letter dated October, 1945, she writes to “Mummy and Daddy”:

I miss my freedom quite a little and have lost another 5 pounds this week because, for once, I am working as hard as I can.... only a few girls take 5 subjects, all the rest take 4.... If I go on losing weight this way in no time, I’ll be slim. . . . Meg won’t be able to say anything about the melon. My gray skirt is now too loose...I’ve been writing some poems and will, God willing get them in the [illegible]. I love the countryside as you prophesied. In the future I will try and walk more. All my love, Kate ¹⁶

Beside her signature, she draws a pug. We see how she seeks approval, acknowledgement for her efforts to lose weight and to write poems. She studies hard, takes extra classes, vows to exercise. Later at school, Kate found solace in nature and even more, in horses. She managed her loneliness at boarding school by escaping into fields and woods on horseback. This physical and spiritual release also informs her adulthood and her poetry.

Her poem “Leaving”¹⁷ addresses her perceived exile to boarding school: It begins:

¹⁵ Ibid., 271.

¹⁶ Kate Barnes letter to Elizabeth Coatsworth and Henry Beston, Oct. 1945, folder “October 2 to November 1945,” box 3, Beston Family Papers.

¹⁷ Kate Barnes, “Leaving” in *Kneeling Orion* (Jaffrey, NH: Godine Press, 2004), 55.

My father told my mother, and she told me
that I didn't have to go to boarding school
until I was thirteen. I didn't think
much about it, I understood
there was no choice. Our father often reminded us
that in England children went off to school
at seven or eight.

The poem goes on to describe the solitary train ride, with seats “that smelled of steam / and dust,” and the book her mother pressed into her hands at the station: *The Oxford Book of English Verse*. This begins her formal education away from her family. She manages her loneliness with words and her eyes on the natural world. On the train she looks out the window at the “rocky hillside there, a shallow/ brown river there, running fast / among tall elms with sandbars rising” all the while thumbing her book of verse with gilded edges.

The father's ousting of his daughter may have caused a psychic rift she later seeks to repair with words. Her poetic concerns fall within our contemporary understanding of ecopoetics, including a wider understanding of “eco,” from the Greek *oikos*: family, property, house.¹⁸ Barnes's exile from her home and her mother is later manifested in her poetic critique of the family's patrilineal hierarchy.

Filial Regrets

Beston made no secret of his wish for sons. In 1945, he wrote to his friend, Luther Nuff, “A psychologist ought to do a study of what happens to a man without sons...down the slope he goes, fighting the incline, towards knitting and tasting, and frustration at the bottom.”¹⁹ This longing for sons and the primary importance of the father-son relationship is reflected in literature. Boose and

¹⁸ Angela Hume and Samia Rahimtoola, “Introduction: Queering Poetics,” *ISLE Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 24 no. 1 (May 2018). 134–49, doi: 10.1093/isle/isy014.

¹⁹ Payne, *Orion on the Dunes*, 266.

Flowers note that of all the familiar literary permutations, that “father and son are the first pair most frequently in focus, and the mother and the son next.”²⁰ Daughter and father relationships are the least examined. The traditional family unit tends to be hierarchal and patriarchal; it positions the father in a superior position, the daughter as subordinate.

Beston’s regret at not having a son was apparent to his daughter. In an adult letter, Barnes writes:

Reading over his books I notice he never – ever – uses the word “daughter.” In *Northern Farm*, Meg and I are “the children.” *Herbs and the Earth* is dedicated to “two young persons who never pull up or step on Father’s herbs.” I should think not! The book came out in 1935 when I was a well-tended baby. He couldn’t use the word “daughters” because having them was a reproach to his manhood. I really think that he felt that REAL MEN had, at the best, sons – At the least, sons & daughters. That was intense for him.²¹

Barnes wrote several poems related to Beston’s frustration toward his prolific wife and his bitterness for not having a son. “American Women”²² a poem written in four sections of tercets, begins:

“American Women!”
said my father
often and bitterly.

All his unhappiness
was in the phrase,
the great anger

That life was unfair -
to him, to him -
I can hear it yet.

²⁰ Lynda E. Boose and Betty S. Flowers, eds., *Daughters and Fathers* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1989), 2.

²¹ Kate Barnes letter to Eleanor Mattern, Oct. 11, 1997, box 1, Kate Barnes Archives (Maine Women Writers’ Collection, University of New England, Portland, ME).

²² Barnes, “American Women” in *Kneeling Orion*, 20, 21.

The message in it
was for my mother:
“Castrating bitches.”

The short lines, often punctuated with a period, create a terse mood, as though the poem reflects the chill in the household climate. The mother’s offence is writing books with ease; her success emasculates the father, who lashes out at “American women!” with “unhappiness” and “anger.” The speaker, “can hear it yet,” showing the indelible memory this tension etched.

I, too,
a ten-year-old future
American woman,

heard it all
in that agreeable
house of books

The contrast between the hostile father and the “agreeable” house, populated by books, is profound—more so because it is the mother writing the books, while the father vents about the state of world affairs. The section goes on to describe how the entire landscape, “gardens, the lawn / yielding to hayfields, /the fields / to the lake” all breathed in “his rage and grief.” Even the lake and the clouds overhead feel this thick emotion. In the third section, the now mature speaker wonders:

Wasn’t it my fault?
Right after

I was born,
my father had come
to my mother’s bedside

In a storm of tears -
once again, no son.

The girl recognizes her connection to her mother, and her own destiny as a future “American woman.” The daughter’s birth spawns tears for the father, rather than joy. The fourth and final section emphasizes the daughter’s burden of disappointment:

I spent
a lot of my time
in attics. When people
called me, I wouldn’t breathe
or answer. I wished
could be invisible,
an invisible child,
or perhaps only
an unconceived,
wandering, unrealized
spirit, a speck,
a spark, a shadow,
a twist of wind
in the standing hay.

We see the speaker wanting to be invisible, even “unconceived.” This residual childhood pain spawns a poem where the remembered child wants to transform into “a spark, a shadow” to become “a twist of wind.” This organic metamorphosis rebirths the child into a natural element.

Feminist scholars have suggested a daughter’s ambition may be affected by a father’s preference for sons and disappointment in daughters. Noting how a father may represent the larger patriarchal culture, Patricia Reis write that we must turn “our attention toward understanding and deconstructing the collective father. . .Understanding the interconnections between the personal father and the cultural father is imperative if we are to free our bodies, minds, souls, and claim our power to live a creative life”²³

²³ Patricia Reis, *Daughters of Saturn: From Father’s Daughter to Creative Woman* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 19.

The father/daughter relationship also sets the tone for subsequent relationships with men, according to Reis. The daughter is shaped by her connection with her father; he will impact her sense of self, sexuality, and competency. A “father can make or break her feelings of self-esteem or self-confidence, her understanding of herself as a woman, her belief in herself and her own authority as she enters the world.”²⁴ In Barnes’ case, she had strong role models in her mother, grandmother, and aunt. She attended girls’ camps, girls’ schools, and a female college. Indeed, during all her developing life she was exposed to strong women in her own family, and as friends, mentors, and models. Nevertheless, it appears these women were not enough to balance the weight of paternal influences. Barnes’s portrayal of her father as a malevolent character in her poems, and her pondering, in her letters, about his power point to the impact of both the personal and the cultural father.

In *Hideous Progeny*, Katherine Hill-Miller describes her study on literary daughters and how their fathers trained them to follow their “intellectual footsteps.” Her text focuses, in part, on Mary Shelley, born in 1797 to Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin. Like Shelley, Kate Barnes was born into an extraordinary literary family. And also like her, Barnes spent much of her life “contending with ghosts of both her mother and her father.”²⁵

Mary Shelley adored her father, writes Hill-Miller, yet she also felt hostility, and this combination of passions appears in her novels. Godwin encouraged his daughter’s literary learnings, and her education, as did Beston with Barnes. Both treated their daughters as intellectual heirs, yet both fathers withdrew their support as their daughters reached womanhood and became

²⁴ Ibid., 22.

²⁵ Katherine C. Hill-Miller, *My Hideous Progeny: Mary Shelley, William Godwin, and the Father-Daughter Relationship* (Newark: University of Delaware Press. 1995), 19

wives and mothers. We can see Kate Barnes's parallel admiration and fear of her father and fear of becoming like him.

In an adult letter, Barnes writes that she has often been compared to her father. A friend once told her, "I think your temperament is much more like your father's. It's like having two dressage horses, one who is absolutely steady, who will always do his best....and another who can be extra brilliant – SOMETIMES!"²⁶ In another letter the following year, Kate writes that her mother once "shivered my timbers by saying 'You must guard against the part of you that is your father.'" ²⁷ Barnes identified with her mother, Beston's counterweight. All Barnes's adult life was lived in Coatsworth's immortal glow: "My mother seems to be with me everywhere. I think about anything – writing, the conduit of life, foxes, all animals, the sadness of the world. And she is there already . . . I got a fortune cookie the other day, and it just said RICH. I thought, yes, not in money, but in having had my mother."²⁸

In the same letter, Barnes reflects on recent reading she's done of Maxine Kumin, Sharon Olds, and Susan Griffin. She's taken with Griffin's comment that "the central problem with women's writing: that is self-hatred, hatred of the body, hatred of one's own [female] voice, hatred of one's perceptions." Perhaps this lack of confidence and belief in her own perceptions delayed Barnes from reclaiming her poetic voice until after her father's death.

Barnes addresses her dead father directly, in her poem "Prospero's Cell."²⁹

while I sit talking to my dead father
telling him I understand, I can see now

²⁶ Kate Barnes letter to Eleanor Mattern, Dec. 26, 1996, box 1, Barnes Archives'.

²⁷ Kate Barnes letter to Eleanor Mattern. Dec. 7, 1997, *ibid.*'

²⁸ Kate Barnes letter to Eleanor Mattern. Sept. 4, 1997, *ibid.*

²⁹ Barnes, "Prospero's Cell" in *Kneeling Orion*, 35.

how it was for him, why he never once
wrote the word “daughter”

in any of his books. “I realize
you were afraid,” I say, “If you’d admitted
you just had girls, that your only children
were two *daughters*, the very word
would have lifted itself off the page
to steal the pith from your arm.

Here we can see a sort of mild resolution as the speaker tells her dead father, “I understand.”

Yet, the understanding underscores the residual hurt. If the essence of the word “daughter” would emasculate him, “steal” his most vital energy, then the reality of having two girls was indeed his misfortune. The speaker addresses her father, while he “lies under a boulder as high as my breast bone / at the edge of the wood, / a skeleton” referring to the family burial ground at Chimney Farm, where Beston is buried beneath a large glacial erratic.

Mythology

At Chimney Farm, Henry maintained robust epistolary relationships, writing several letters a day, a practice Kate would adopt. In letters to friends, he articulates dismay at the war: “When sixty thousand people can be killed in one hideous instant by an annihilationist machine, the show is over.”³⁰ Yet to thirteen-year-old Kate, away at boarding school, he focuses on his simple existence.³¹

Hello Kate, old girl... Yesterday as I was getting the farm warmed up and melting the ice from the frost-curtained windows, I began to think of the winters Mother, and you, and I spent here, and I decided that Mother and you were heroines, and that I was a sort of hero myself! How did we do it! Well, the accomplishment certainly reflects on the family! ... The house is as quiet as a stone in the mountains

³⁰ Payne, *Orion on the Dunes*, 265.

³¹ Henry Beston letter to Kate Barnes, Dec. 18, 1945, box 3, Beston Family Papers.

of the moon, and very warm and cozy. I can hear the fire in the range talk to itself....
Well, Puss, old girl, all good things + lots of love! Ever, Father

That winter, Henry was alone at Chimney Farm until Elizabeth and the girls joined him for the holidays. The solitude suited him more than the clutter of the Hingham suburbs, and his epistolary circle kept him company in his quiet house, listening to the “fire in the range talk to itself.” Since family is generally absent from Beston’s writing, his cumulative letters become the family text. In the above letter we see Henry thinks of himself and his family as characters in an adventure story—with his role as hero complimented by Elizabeth and Kate as heroines.

Even the name of the house, “Chimney Farm,” and frequent references to “the farm” is part of a well-crafted narrative. A “farm” may suggest milking cows, acres of corn, or rows of vegetables, but this was not the case with the Beston property. While Henry was proud of his herb garden where he tended plants and generated ideas for a book (*Herbs and the Earth*), a neighboring farmer leased the pastures for hay, tended their fields, and kept his horses in the barn. Henry’s herb garden was less a culinary pursuit and more a contemplative exercise. He spent hours with catalogues, considering his choices. Once planted, he would sit in the garden: “At long intervals he might crumble a piece of earth between his fingers or pull up a weed. But mostly he was just staring and staring,” Coatsworth writes.³²

The Beston household stayed fiscally afloat due to Coatsworth’s steady royalties and modest family investments. Otherwise, like the Alcott family in the nineteenth century, they may have been destitute due to their farming habits.³³ The Beston family did not stake their livelihood

³² Elizabeth Coatsworth, ed. *Especially Maine*, 7.

³³ John Matteson, *Eden’s Outcasts: The Story of Louisa May Alcott and her Father* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007).

on the land; the connection was aesthetic and artistic rather than material.³⁴ Principally, the Beston household “only grew words,”³⁵ as Barnes has said, while Coatsworth’s prolific and lucrative writing sustained them.

Beston, Coatsworth, and Barnes all write of haying, for example, but their fields were leased to neighboring farmers. They did not rely on their crops or the weather, unlike other families in town, who “cobbled together a living,” to use an old Maine expression, through harvesting, putting up fruits and vegetables to get through the winter, and selling goods to tourists. Melanie Simo discusses this phenomenon in Maine, where rural traditions remained despite agricultural decline.³⁶

Barnes’s poetry questions this mythology of a heroic family, as she dismantles the impression of a happy household reading under the eaves. In “Coming Back,” the opening poem in Barnes’s collection, *Crossing the Field*, the speaker “can hear my dead father / still grieving and raging downstairs like the Minotaur / in the depths of the palace cellar; like water, / my mother’s voice goes on soothingly, / *Sleep now.*”³⁷

The mythological Minotaur, with the head of a bull and body of a man, who devours humans for substance, represents the father. He needs the women who surround him—wife and daughter—to sustain him, and perhaps as repository for his anger and disappointment. The house becomes a labyrinth where he lives, surrounded by walls of books.

³⁴ Joshua Sullivan discusses this potential schism between material labor and artistic rendition in “The Starry Plough: Twentieth-Century Environmental and Communal Continuity in Henry Beston’s ‘Northern Farm,’” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment*, 2, no. 4 (Autumn 2014), 844–57, doi: 10.1093/isle/isu095.

³⁵ Barnes, *Words from the Frontier*.

³⁶ Melanie Simo, *Literature of Place: Dwelling on the Land Before Earth Day 1970* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005).

³⁷ Kate Barnes, *Crossing the Field* (Nobleboro, ME: Blackberry Books, 1992), 2.

Barnes also evokes biblical figures. “At Home”³⁸ describes her father writing:

The hand moved slowly back and forth
and the floor below was white with sheets of paper
each carrying a rejected phrase or two
as he struggled all morning to finish one sentence –
like a smith hammering thick and glowing iron,
like Jacob wresting with the astonishing angel.

The story of Jacob struggling with an angel is widely interpreted as an allegorical battle between man and God.³⁹ In this poem, the writer is struggling to produce a satisfactory phrase. In the biblical account, Jacob is released from the battle when he asks for a blessing and is granted one. Yet Barnes’s poem ends during the struggle; there is no release or resolution.

Coatsworth also writes of how painstaking the writing process could be for Beston. While she often wrote “at top speed”⁴⁰ churning out poems, stories, and young adult novels, Beston’s words often were “crunched up into a ball and thrown over his shoulder onto the floor ... Occasionally an entire morning’s work would be spent on a single sentence.”⁴¹

Barnes also struggles with her own mythology, her own story, and its implications. In “The Kitchen Window”⁴² Barnes’s speaker remembers looking outside and seeing an “eleven-year-old girl whose light brown hair / loops in strong curls” as she sat bareback on a pony, “with staring blue eyes, a pony like a prophet.” The girl and pony disappear, and the second stanza belongs to the speaker washing dishes at the window as she tries to remember what she wished for, when she was that girl:

³⁸ Barnes, *Where the Deer Were*, 26.

³⁹ Stefano Zuffi, *Old Testament Figures in Art* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2003), 125.

⁴⁰ Coatsworth, *Personal Geographies*, 119.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Barnes, “The Kitchen Window” in *Kneeling Orion*, 15.

I was singing lullabies
about a bleating lamb, I was telling endless
fairy tales – as if anyone ever
lived happily ever after, as if the fearful twist
of sadness and betrayal didn't twine
through everything, even the brightest threads
of light....

The girl riding bareback, the woman washing dishes, are in the past. The final stanza shifts to third person: “And so the ghost / goes back to washing her dishes, the ghost /of a young woman who has no trouble creating / a world of glittering, pure, unbroken / happiness.” There is a kind of mythology created here, with a reinvention of the past and removal of the self through use of the third-person speaker, who is happiest seated on her pony or singing lullabies to her lamb. The speaker reinvents her past and substitutes an unhappy childhood with a blissful one, on “a pony like a prophet” riding through “running streams and green, new leaves.”

In “The Rhetoric of Fiction,”⁴³ a series of twelve linked poems describes a courtship, marriage, marital abuse, and separation. The narrative series mirrors Barnes’s personal experience, though the poems are written in the third person and the woman is never named. The painful marital story is now “fiction.”

Barnes’s reading of feminist poets and theorists in the 1980s and 1990s may have prompted her to work through her complex relationships with her father and her husband, to cast them as characters in her poems.⁴⁴ Kowaleski -Wallace outlines a cultural argument where women tend to attribute aggression only to men, and in doing so, deny female power and anger. This Janus face

⁴³ Kate Barnes, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Durham, NH: Oyster River Press, 2001). This series of poems first appeared in the *New England Review* in 1994, and was then published as a chapbook, with Barnes’s illustrations throughout.

⁴⁴ Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, *Their Fathers’ Daughters: Hannah More, Maria Edgeworth, and Patriarchal Complicity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 296.

of power and passivity is well expressed in the tenth poem of the series. “In the Corner”⁴⁵ shows two characters:

They are off in the corner
of the bedroom floor, red tiles
ten inches square, and he is banging
her head on them.
She has gone
limp, she has learned better
than to struggle --
but she lets
her sobs escape, trying instinctively
to rouse his pity.

Yet this man has no pity to rouse. We know nothing of any physical abuse in the Beston household, yet the tension and rage we’ve seen depicted in Barnes’s poetry concerning her childhood describes a pattern we may consider emotional abuse. In the marriage in this poem, the source for this erupting physical violence is the wife’s refusal to submit:

As he hits her,
he yells in her face, over and over, be more
submissive, dammit, be more
submissive,
and she
can say nothing. She thinks,
but I am *utterly*
submissive.
It’s not
true. She has never given up
a stubbornness, an unthinking assumption
that she exists, something she doesn’t even
know she has – although he
seems to have noticed it.

⁴⁵ Barnes, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, 17, 18.

As the violence peaks with physical blows, the woman's spark ignites. She won't allow him to obliterate her spirit; her autonomy lives in a quiet place where it is safe. Her language has returned. This poem moves from monosyllabic or two-syllable words of earlier poems in the series to polysyllabic diction: "stubbornness" and "unthinking assumption." The use of white space here, the breath between the words, adds drama to the scene. The poem ends with the abuser passed out, and the beaten woman crawling slowly to bed:

her eyes wide open,
staring at nothing, her thoughts
veering in all directions --
like the last gusts in a storm,
full of torn off twigs and leaves.

The speaker's energy is organic, part of nature, "gusts in a storm"; the debris she leaves behind is also part of the natural world. This physical climax to the series is noteworthy for the release of passion and the speaker's epiphany that yes, "she exists."

In the final poem of this series, "Chapter Twelve: The Dining Car,"⁴⁶ the speaker imagines the husband and wife meeting expectedly after decades of separation. She chooses the neutral yet romantic space of a dining car on a train "crossing the Rockies" where the "two gray-haired people, might sit at a clean white tablecloth / a last time across from one another." Their imaginary conversation is cordial, "Let's not start blaming / anyone" but soon the old pattern interrupts the façade as "he poured a big splash / of brandy into his coffee" and she realizes that "He is really / more bitter than ever. He'd like to make a last gesture, / all right, he'd like to belt her one --." This is not going to be a fairytale with a happy ending. Yet, the speaker looks outward where "the stars continue their unbroken dancing" and even beyond "the furthest reaches / of any imagination, they

⁴⁶ Ibid., 20, 21.

trace their intricate patterns / into a balance that is always shifting, / and always perfect.” While the couple will not reconnect, the star-filled sky provides solace. Again, Barnes has transformed her experience into poetry and found resolution in words.

Celestial Kinship

Both Henry Beston and Kate Barnes share delight in the stars and their celestial verse in the night sky. In *Northern Farm*, Beston writes of stepping out from the warmth of the kitchen fire, to retrieve something in the barn. Outside, he finds himself beholding a sky “with an immense glittering of stars in their luminous rivers and pale mists, in their solitary and unneighbored splendors.”⁴⁷ The stars take on planetary features as rivers and condensation, and their extravagance is amplified by being “unneighbored.” Above all, shines Orion: “There exalted and assembled in one immense principality of the skies, the shining press of the greater winter constellations glittered above the little cold and dark of earth. Orion, most beautiful of all the stellar figures, shone above the meridian, the timeless hunter of the timeless sky.”⁴⁸

Beston’s fascination with the theater of the night sky began as a child and continued throughout his life.⁴⁹ His *Starlight Wonder Book*, a collection of fairy tales published in 1921, points to the sky. The *Outermost House* concludes with chapter ten, “Orion Rises on the Dunes,” where he writes of walking on the beach at the end of an August night:

In the luminous east, two great stars aslant were rising clear of the exhalations of darkness gathered at the rim of night and ocean—Betelgeuse and Bellatrix, the shoulders of Orion. Autumn had come, and the Giant stood again at the horizon of

⁴⁷ Coatsworth, *Especially Maine*, 85.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Payne, *Orion*, 11.

day and the ebbing year, his belt still hidden in the bank of cloud, his feet in the depths of space and the far surges of the sea.⁵⁰

And so Beston ends his most celebrated text and a year that he will never replicate: “For the gifts of life are the earth’s and they are given to all, and they are the songs of birds at daybreak, Orion and the Bear, and dawn seen over the ocean from the beach.”⁵¹ The pure intensity of that mostly solitary year on the dunes, when words and stargazing were Beston’s only obligations, would remain a beacon in his memory. Later he returns to astronomy, “my first love,”⁵² and finds delight in the night sky.

Kate, too, looks to the stars in her work. The title of her final collection, *Kneeling Orion*, gestures to her father. The title poem is narrative, constructed in five stanzas, with all but the first opening with Barnes’s hallmark of triple indenting the first line, like a big breath before speaking.⁵³

The poem is written in the third person; we meet “a lonely woman” in the first line, “two hours before dawn.” She has woken from dreams of an embrace, “still feeling / the warm shudder at her core.” The line break after “feeling” emphasizes a physical aspect of the lonely woman, before we learn to what the physical sensation refers. She looks out at her old car, “glistening with frost. It’s blind / with hard rime” but the motor runs and softens the ice. This slant rhyme of “blind” and “rime” feels serendipitous, as though a happy accident has happened for the poet.

The second stanza takes us past white wrapped bales of hay, “shimmering in the darkness / as if white cows were lying there asleep / looming in the faint light / of the stars.” Even the industrial plastic packaging of hay becomes “mystic” and “wonderful.” As she drives on in the

⁵⁰ Henry Beston, *The Outermost House* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1988), 215.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁵² Coatsworth, *Especially Maine*, 147.

⁵³ Barnes, *Kneeling Orion*, 127, 128.

third stanza, she sees three does leap “in long bounds like the ups-and-downs / of rocking horses.” They shine in the headlights and “drop away.” Each line is crafted with such purposeful movement that reading them feels like watching a diorama.

The last two stanzas open with questions: “What’s below?” The reader looks below with the speaker, to see a “slow stream flowing down the cleft / of the gully” and later “tangled branches / of poplar and swamp maple.” The final stanza asks, “What’s Above?” and returns to the title image:

Only the brilliant night, Orion
kneeling over the black field,
his vast body extended, his bright shoulders
lifting his outstretched arms, his handing sword
glittering before him

Bent over the dark field, the constellation Orion becomes alive. His shoulders extend the poem’s right margin to lift his arms, and in the next line, his sword juts out even farther. All those soft *s* words: *vast*, *shoulders*, *his outstretched arms*, *sword*, make a swooshing gesture in the poem, as though the sword has swished through the air. The sound is then replaced by dazzling imagery, as the sword is pictured with

... stars spilling all around
in grains of blue fire; and himself,
winter’s giant, rising once again
into the autumn sky, brushing the bare treetops
with his shining thighs, filling the cold air
with seeds of light.

The spilling stars like the hunter’s grain; his “shining thighs” spreading “seeds of light” further personify the night sky and make the magnificent constellation come alive like the winter giant he represents.

In the penultimate poem of this collection, “In a Dream,”⁵⁴ the speaker remembers her “terrifying father, long dead,” a dream prompted by a conversation Barnes had with an editor over a new edition of one of Beston’s works. This opening stanza gives a narrative entrance, the welcome space into the poem, which then recesses into memory. The first line of the second stanza is triple indented, a frequent Barnes device, as though opening a door wider:

The old wallpaper
in my parents’ farm kitchen, the one with faded scenes
from Currier & Ives on it, lies buried
under many newer patterns. Would it even
be possible anymore to pry them up
and reveal the place where my father wrote
on the wall with his pencil (in Greek),
Be on the side of life?

The wallpaper is both real and metaphor, imagined and true. How many layers of experience cover our relationship with the past? Can we ever reclaim the essence of an event, however vivid the details might be (the pencil, the Greek)? The language here is quotidian, nothing flowery or calling attention to poetic technique. Instead, the speaker invites us to answer her question and be a participant in the kitchen.

The third stanza opens the door even wider with its indentation, and deeper in context, as we travel to the night the father died:

When he died,
in his bed in that same house, all the lights
flicked off for a moment. His spirit
always *was* perturbed. I often think
how good it is that he doesn’t have to bear
what’s happening to our world (although
he would have predicted it). He would grieve

⁵⁴ Ibid., 150, 151.

so fiercely, he would rage, he would tear
himself and everyone around him
to tatters.

The rage of the father is juxtaposed against the reflective mood of the poem. Three repetitions of “he would” create a mantra. His violence would spread to “everyone around him”; all would be reduced “to tatters.” Such is the magnitude of the patriarchy here; the king’s fury would be felt by all. The speaker offers a consolatory line, being grateful that the father’s absence spares him from worldly affairs that would have further tormented him.

The fourth and final stanza offers a sonnet-like turn: Because “his words / go on being stamped onto pages,” he may be pleased about that. And “maybe he’s looking / down the field right now, just after sunrise / from the farm graveyard at the edge of the woods.” The raging man may be pleased at his legacy. Though he’s looking from the graveyard, the sun has just risen, showing life and death sharing a couplet as a natural union. The poem ends with another question:

Does he see his red house, the laden
apple trees, the long shadows, the deer
stealing in among the dry corn stalks,
while, below them, mist wreathes upward
in drifts from the black stillness of the lake?

Clearly, a man so committed to nature’s rhythms and the denizens of his land would notice these details, if he could. Can he? Where does the dream end? What are the borders between the dream and reality, between the living and the dead? Can we ever know them? The poet/daughter’s perception of her father’s anguished spirit features again in this dream/poem; familial ties and their resilience cast a pall over both the dream and the poem.

We can also read “In a Dream” as a metaphorical remembering of the father. “Language works by association in order to evoke the father’s full power, a power which resides beyond the paternal body itself.”⁵⁵ Barnes’s relationship with her father assumes a literary form after his death. He is reconstructed in absentia in these poems. This restoration, this re-membering, offers a poetic resolution to their tumultuous relationship.

Conclusion

Born into a family where reading and writing were sacred activities, Kate Barnes echoed her parents’ love of language and its possibilities. Both parents made their living arranging words, although their chosen genres differed: Coatsworth was primarily a poet and novelist, while Beston wrote essays on natural history, nature, and culture. As a poet, Barnes followed her mother’s path, through Barnes’s subject matter often includes the natural world admired by both parents. Poetry gives Barnes the literary freedom to also explore an emotional landscape, to tap the vein that was her tumultuous relationship with her father. Ultimately, in her poems she re-creates her childhood, with all its emotional terrain, influenced by both her parents and her wider literary and cultural lineage.

Both parents were eccentric and iconoclastic. They had the privilege to write as their chosen labor, to send their daughters to private schools, to travel and entertain and maintain two households. They were also products of their time, coming of age during two world wars and the rise of industrial America. Beston was emotionally scarred by World War I; his experiences as an ambulance driver showed him war’s carnage, and his subsequent retreat into nature can be seen, partially, as a response to that exposure. His hermitage on a Cape Cod beach and the success of

⁵⁵ Kowaleski-Wallace, *Their Fathers’ Daughters*, 307.

The Outermost House mark a period significantly different from his later life as husband and father, when he was unable to recapture the rhythms of those sentences written with the sonic soundscape of wind and tides.

Barnes grew up in the aftermath of World War II, with the women's movement, the rise of a new bohemian culture, and a flourishing of women's voices in literature. She found her voice after her parents' deaths, and in her writing, she re-creates them. Her father's anger and disappointment at not having a son informed Barnes's childhood and her poetry. Like Beston, Barnes evokes classical mythology, and creates her own, reshaping her familial experience in poems. Her father's passion for astronomy kindled her own, as she, too, looked to the stars for divine beauty. She, too, evokes Orion in her final book of poetry; he earns the book's title and features in many of the later poems.

Henry Beston and Kate Barnes were united by rhythms of rural life which enthralled them both. It will take continued vigilance for generations of essayists and poets to chronicle environmental beauty and ward against environmental violence. Indeed, the night sky that was an inspiration to both Beston and Barnes is increasingly swallowed by light.

In the spring of 2018, Kate Barnes's burial stone was erected beside her parents' graves. A slate gray tablet, it includes a few lines of her verse: "Crossing the field / in sunlight and singing." Below is an etching of a joyous horse, kicking up his hind legs in delight. Thus, the daughter rests with her parents, now three writers on Chimney Farm, all who delighted in growing words.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ I would like to thank *The North Meridian Review's* anonymous reviewers for providing comments that improved this essay. I am also grateful to the Maine Women Writers Collection for assistance in their archives, and also to Bowdoin College. Thanks to Daniel G. Payne for reviewing an early version of this work and to Lisa Botshon for her comments and suggestions. On behalf of the many Maine poets who were mentored by Kate Barnes, thanks also to her for her guidance and generous encouragement.

Bibliography

- Barnes, Kate. *Crossing the Field*. Nobleboro, ME: Blackberry Books, 1992.
- Barnes, Kate. *Kneeling Orion*. Jaffrey, NH: Godine Press, 2004.
- Beston Family Papers. George J. Mitchell Department of Special Collections & Archives, Bowdoin Library. Brunswick, ME.
- Kate Barnes Archives. Maine Women Writers' Collection. University of New England. Portland, ME.
- Barnes, Kate. *Where the Deer Were*. Jaffrey, NH: Godine Press, 1994.
- Barnes, Kate. *Words from the Frontier: Poetry in Maine*.
<http://www.poetryinmaine.org/barnes.php>.
- Beston, Henry. *The Outermost House*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1988.
- Boose, Lynda E. and Betty S. Flowers, eds. *Daughters and Fathers*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1989.
- Coatsworth, Elizabeth. *Personal Geography: Almost an Autobiography*. Brattleboro, VT: Stephen Greene Press, 1976
- Coatsworth, Elizabeth, ed. *Especially Maine. The Natural World of Henry Beston from Cape Cod to the St. Lawrence*. Brattleboro, VT: Stephen Green Press, 1970.
- Coatsworth, Elizabeth. *The Cat Who Went to Heaven*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1958.
- Cohen, Paula Marantz. *Daughter as Reader: Encounters between Literature and Life*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996.
- Cook, Mariana. *Fathers and Daughters: In Their Own Words*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1994.
- Hill-Miller, Katherine C. *My Hideous Progeny: Mary Shelley, William Godwin, and the Father-Daughter Relationship*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1995.
- Hume, Angela and Samia Rahimtoola. "Introduction: Queering Poetics." *ISLE Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*. 24, no. 1 (May 2018): 134–49. doi: 10.1093/isle/isy014.
- Matteson, John. *Eden's Outcasts: The Story of Louisa May Alcott and her Father*. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007.
- Montgomery, Marion. *The Men I Have Chosen for Fathers: Literary and Philosophical Passages*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990.

- Payne, Daniel G. *Orion on the Dunes: A Biography of Henry Beston*. Boston: David R Godine Publisher, 2016.
- Potts, Dale E. "Community within Nature: Culture and Environment in the Chimney Farm Literature of Henry Beston and Elizabeth Coatsworth, 1944–48." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*. 18, no. 4 (Autumn 2011): 820–39. doi: 10.1093/isle/isr105.
- Reis, Patricia. *Daughters of Saturn: From Father's Daughter to Creative Woman*. New York: Continuum, 1995.
- Simo, Melanie. *Literature of Place: Dwelling on the Land before Earth Day 1970*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005.
- Sullivan, Joshua. "The Starry Plough: Twentieth-Century Environmental and Communal Continuity in Henry Beston's 'Northern Farm'": *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment*. 2, no. 4 (Autumn 2014): 844–57. doi: 10.1093/isle/isu095.
- Taylor, Ellen. "Personal Geographies: Poetic Lineage of American Poets Elizabeth Coatsworth and Kate Barnes," *ELOPE: English Language Overseas* 13, no. 2 (2016): 111–27. doi: 10.4312/elope.13.2.111-127
- Yaegar, Patricia and Beth Kowaleski, eds. *Refiguring the Father: New Feminist Readings on Patriarchy*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989.
- Zuffi, Stefano. *Old Testament Figures in Art*. Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2003.

*“THIS
MACHINE
KILLS
FASCISTS.”*

-WOODY GUTHRIE

SPECIAL ISSUE:

NOTHING SWEET: WOODY GUTHRIE, PEOPLE'S SONGS, REVOLUTIONARY LOVE...

DOUG MORRIS

[Every] artist must fight for freedom or slavery. I've made my choice.

-Paul Robeson

We thought the world was worth saving and that we could do it with songs.

-Irwin Silber

The world (though not some of its institutions) is surely worth saving, and the urgency of the task grows with each passing day, made clear by, among other things: climate change/global warming and related disasters; eco-system destruction; the Sixth Great Extinction; ongoing wars; police state violence and repression; hunger, poverty, pandemics, and pestilence; and inequality of wealth and power. Songs alone, despite Irwin Silber's thoughts, will certainly not abolish the forms of degradation and dehumanization that still trouble the world, songs will not overthrow capitalism and engender socialism (despite the dreams of many of the singers of "people's songs"), or create democracy in the workplace; nor will songs provide people with the skills and tools necessary to build a society in which the self-realization and fulfillment of each is the condition for the self-realization and fulfillment of all. But songs, as potential vehicles for transcendence, can help people develop a better understanding of the world, feel what it means to go beyond and be liberated from the present, enliven the radical spirit, and inspire the collective will to engage in carrying out the urgently needed structural transformations that might save the world from cataclysm.

Given the threat of cataclysms, one might consider it rather anomalous, even outlandish, to reflect on and write about songs and singers, and especially if one is focusing on a singer of

people's songs dead now more than fifty years. "Who cares about Woody Guthrie, people are dying," one might say. Yes, there surely are more urgent topics (see above). Given the power of songs and the influence of singers, however, in people's individual and collective lives, we might consider it equally aberrant, or more so, to not consider the relationship between the power of songs and singers as transformative cultural forces and agents (and sometimes, unfortunately, transmogrificational forces and agents), and the manifold monstrosities we are facing. Given the crises and challenges we now confront we must pursue every possible pathway for developing *rebellious attitudes* that struggle AGAINST the root causes of the crises we face, and *revolutionary attitudes* geared toward struggling FOR the kind of decent, dignified, and sustainable society we need. One of the multiple pathways to go beyond the meanness of the world is through songs for the people.

Woody Guthrie (1912–1967) told us in song that there are "Mean Things Happening in This World." Therein, more than seventy years ago, Woody sings (and it could be sung today) about people without "a cryin' dime," people being spied on by the police, "brothers and sisters killed" to serve the interests of the "green back dollar bill," people thrown in jail for talking peace or "brotherly love" in the streets, and the need to "organize my brother and sister" if we are going to "win this world" that really belongs to us. Winning this world that belongs to us, not to those obsessed with "the dollar will," is a theme expressed in Woody's most famous song, "this land is made for you and me [not the ownership class]," so we must mobilize and fight to "win this world" that is rightfully ours.

To try to address and overcome those mean things happening, seventy-five years ago, on December 31, 1949, a group of folksingers, union organizers, and other radicals (including Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, Bess Lomax Hawes, and Irwin Silber—and roughly twenty-five others),

with a common interest in folk songs and political songs, gathered in a Greenwich Village basement to create an organization, *People's Songs*, dedicated to spreading the message of radical democracy and popular participation through songs. They wanted to sing songs that educated and entertained, reflected and transformed, that grounded and transcended, and that moved people emotionally and awakened people intellectually. The “people” to whom they were referring were primarily the working people of the world. Guthrie, Seeger, and the others understood songs to be an intrinsic and imaginative component of a wider cultural apparatus rooted in and growing out of lived experience in the dominant capitalist culture, that could both expand people’s critical understanding of the world as well as nurture and nourish people’s capacities for creative engagement with, production in, and transformation of the world.

If songs are intrinsically an expression of the imagination, and imagination is the source of empathy because it provides us an opening into the lives of others, then those committed to singing people’s songs asked how it is that songs might be incorporated in ways that generate not only empathy (feeling the pain and suffering of others) but also compassion (actions to alleviate the cause of the pain and suffering). These would be songs, inflamed by a socialist/communist consciousness, that helped working people both understand the root cause of troubles in the system of capitalism and be the root solution to those troubles, in the collective organization and struggles of the people for socialism. People’s songs would function as a mirror on current realities, a window onto different and better realities, and a hammer to help build from where we are to where we want to be.

Gordon Freisen, the editor of *Broadside*, which published the works of Bob Dylan, Malvina Reynold, and Phil Ochs, said that “Woody Guthrie was the only one in the *Almanacs* (1940–1943 New York City–based folk group) really fighting for socialism, who really wanted and needed

socialism.” Others in the *Almanacs*, and surely many more in the later *People’s Songs* gathering, would disagree that Woody was the only one fighting for socialism.

Woody Guthrie has often been referred to as a “protest singer,” but more accurately he should be called a “protest and revolutionary singer,” or “a singer of people’s songs.” Like many of the other singers and composers of people’s songs, Woody used songs to radically educate and to rouse people to political awareness and participation, and to help people critically understand the world and to incorporate that critical understanding in the work to radically change it. People’s songs are rooted in and work to promote the values of community and solidarity, care and love, democracy and freedom, resource sharing and cooperation, equality and fairness, peace and mutual aid, and these days, ecological rationality and sustainability. Musicologist Charles Seeger (Pete’s father) called it “socialism in music.” Bess Lomax Hawes, in talking about “people’s music” said “we saw ourselves as educators and as political artists.” For singers of people’s songs, music was a political act and an educational project geared to singing the truth about the upside-down world in which people live where the poor work all too hard and the rich hardly work.

Woody tried to help people see the “upside-down” nature of things and to turn them right side up. In his song “I Ain’t Got No Home,” the message is conveyed that “the banking man is rich, and the working folks is poor,” while “the rich man took my home and drove me from my door,” capturing in a few lines the exploitative, dispossessing, degrading, and repressive nature of the capitalist system that the Industrial Workers of the World (“The Singing Union”) sang about relentlessly. The Wobblies, in “Solidarity Forever,” refer to bosses taking “untold [tr]illions they never toiled to earn” and noting how without the “brain and muscle [of the working people] not a single wheel would turn.” It is a sentiment expressed in an 1829 lyric printed in an early union

paper, *The Mechanics Press*: "The poor can live without the rich /As every man may know/But none that labor for their bread/Could by the rich be spared."

When Woody sings in "This Land is Your Land," "I saw a bread line forming, in the shadow of the steeple; at the relief office, I saw my people; they stood there hungry, and I stood there asking 'Is this land made for me and you?'" it is Woody's way of saying what *Rage Against the Machine* said fifty years later, "Fuck you, I won't do what you tell me"—i.e., I will not accept that this land should not belong to the working people, whatever the boss class tells us and does. Intimated in Woody's lines that see through the lie of "God Bless America," is a profound anger directed at the upside-down nature of massive and monstrous poverty and suffering imposed on the people who labor to make the world work existing alongside great wealth and ostentatious privilege among those who do no meaningful work but exploit those who do. For Woody, the inequality and indignity should be recognized as intolerable, especially when we understand that "this is our world," not theirs.

For Woody, and other singers of people's songs, there was little separation between, on the one hand, composing and singing songs and, on the other hand, struggling to transform the dominant institutions of the society. Composer Earl Robinson said, "It was clear that our system [of capitalism] had to be overthrown," and "people's music," it was believed, could play a decisive role in the overthrow. Irwin Silber, founder (with Pete Seeger and others), and editor, of *Sing Out!* added that with people's songs, "we were making a political statement and combating [capitalist] ideology." "Boots" Casetta (*People's Songs* West Coast organizer) said that people's songs were to be applied to "whatever struggle we might think was worthwhile." For Woody, at the core of what was worthwhile was the struggle for socialism, what he called "the freedom highway."

Woody was often writing (especially from the late 1930s forward after meeting communists and Wobblies in California) as a socialist/communist/humanist and anti-capitalist, a point easily missed by people who hear “This Land is Your Land” as a patriotic anthem. “Woody’s best song” (as Pete Seeger put it) is, in some sense (as I hear it), Woody’s version of the *Industrial Workers of the World* anthem, “Solidarity Forever,” an anthem to the working people of the land and a clear call to oppose the system rooted in the private capitalist ownership and control of the material and ideological means of production. In Woody’s song, the other side of the “private property” sign “didn’t say nothin’” and it is that side in which private control of property is replaced by cooperation and resource sharing, a form of production that is “made for you and me”—i.e., made for fellow workers and toilers of the world.

One might also be surprised to hear it, but most of Woody’s songs are “love songs,” rooted in a deep care for and love of working people. Pete Seeger captures this need for “love songs” in his classic album *Waist Deep in the Big Muddy and Other Love Songs*, an album that makes it clear that if you love human beings you must be opposed to war and mass violence—i.e., one must be opposed to this kind of meanness in the world, a form of “trouble,” that traumatizes, brutalizes, and destroys human lives. Woody said: “trouble is caused by two things. Fear is one. Greed is the other.” Greed is a problem within the capitalist culture Woody strongly opposed because it reduces people (and the rest of nature) to a source for exploitation and enrichment; and fear is a problem because it reduces other people to a threat to one’s achieving, to one’s accumulating more, and more, and more. Such greed and fear, concomitant with capital, produce anxiety and distress that always results from the inequality in access to the resources and conditions needed to live happy, creative, meaningful, and fulfilling lives. Woody offered a remedy: greed and fear are “removed by one thing, and that is love. That is the secret of secrets,” Woody said, “and you will

never educate yourself past it.” In other words, even the most pervasive and penetrating systems of propaganda and indoctrination cannot erase from us a basic truth about being human: loving and caring for one another, like freedom and democracy, are basic human values that may be suppressed but cannot be extricated and erased.

One is here reminded of Paul Robeson, educator, activist, and singer of people’s songs grounded in *revolutionary love* of the working people of the world. Robeson, singing at the 1952 *Peace Arch Concert* at the border between Canada and the United States (on the border because the U.S. State Department had pulled Robeson’s passport given his love of and care for the working people), changed the lyrics of the old standard “Ol’ Man River” from “I’m tired of livin’ and scared of dyin’” to “**I must keep fighting’ until I’m dyin.**” The lyrical shift moved the singer from the role of reproducer to the role of creator and moved the song from the perspective of passive recipient of history, from an object shaped by conditions, to an active subject participating as an agent in making history, from a mood of acceptance to a statement of protest and resistance, from being determined by external conditions to rebelling against those conditions, from surrendering to fear and fatigue to struggling to overcome that which produces fear and fatigue. In short, the song was converted into a people’s song, a song of resistance, rebellion, and revolution. And there is radical anger in the pronouncement; it is an anger against the meanness in the world and deeply grounded in what Michelle Alexander might call “revolutionary love,” a love rooted in mutual struggles for fulfillment and flourishing, humanized and humanizing comradeship, what Aristotle called *filia*, a condition that demands substantive equality to ensure autonomy. “When we allay our anger in the face of injustice, we subdue our love for the victims of injustice,” to paraphrase William Sloane Coffin, and when we diminish our love for the victims of injustice, we compromise our ability to address and overcome the root cause of the injustice. Robeson, Guthrie,

Seeger, and other singers of people's songs brought a heightened anger and deepened love in the struggle for justice.

Robeson's lyrical shift is a recognition of the unfinished and changeable nature of history, society and people, an acknowledgement that history and society are products of the collective work of human beings who must be always seen as *social/historical/biological individuals*, objects shaped and subjects capable of shaping history and society. To be willing to fight, even if it means one might be dying, or killed in that struggle, is also the fundamental lesson of one of Woody's favorite historical figures, Jesus Christ. Christ teaches that we must be willing to sacrifice life itself in defense of justice and love, demonstrating that "if we love too much, they will kill us (but if we do not love, we will die)," as Terry Eagleton put it. And Ché Guevara taught us that true revolutionaries, such as Robeson and Guthrie, are motivated by a deep love of humanity.

Systems of unjust and unfair, repressive and exploitative, violent and oppressive, authoritarian power want us to be tired of living and scared of dying. Enervation and trepidation serve the interests of the oppressors and exploiters. Like Guthrie, Robeson, implores us to remain vigilant and courageous in the struggle, to not surrender to fear and passivity, to produce a different and better radically democratized society where we also remain conscious of our incompleteness and potential for contributing to and participating in the ongoing struggle for a society in which "it is not idiotic to be kind," as Richard Levins put it.

Robeson's small but vital lyrical shift captures the radical transformative component often present in people's songs, the "fuck you, I won't do what you tell me" element. It points to why Woody Guthrie said he would fight until his last breath and last drop of blood against music that made people feel hopeless and defeated, degraded and demoralized, passive and acquiescent. Robeson's radical shift again points to how we are both makers of history and made by history (so

we should be careful about the kind of history we make), again subjects and objects in the historical/social/transformatory process. It is not that Robeson “will” keep fighting (though he will), but that he “must keep fighting,” it is a moral and rational obligation, a call to take the decisions that integrity demands, and not only in the short term, but until he is dying, revealing the call for a commitment to the long-term struggle of the people for peace, freedom, dignity, equality, and justice. That he “must” is internally driven and externally imposed. The conditions of injustice, exploitation, abuse, discrimination, inequality, violence, and oppression force the issue, but Robeson will not accept being condemned to suffer the indignity of being treated as an object of history, domesticated by dehumanizing, exploitative, and demeaning structures of authoritarian power. Instead, he claims his position as subject and producer of history, fundamental to the work of an engaged and radical artist, a singer of elevating and enlivening people’s songs.

Woody said he worked to write people’s songs that were “living songs,” (to combat the all too many deadening songs in the commercial arena). For Woody, people’s songs that are living songs are songs that make the world a better place for the workers and toilers of the world, songs that nurture and nourish the struggle to overcome conditions of exploitation and humiliation, songs that tell the truth about the everyday life of those victimized by systems of oppressive/authoritarian power, and songs that help us realize that the world belongs to us, not to an anti-democratic elite-minority ownership class. For Woody, creating people’s songs that were “living songs” was a “must,” and again, it is a moral and rational requirement. It was commercial corporatized pop songs Woody tried to avoid, despite his short stint on *Pipe Smoking Time*, in 1940.

As most of the purveyors of people’s songs understand it, people’s songs are grounded in the material realities of working people’s daily lives, toil, struggles, and troubles, but they also elevate into the domain of the spirit so that base and superstructure, roots and branches come together in

a dialectical dance. People's songs were attempting to bring a radical sensibility and sensitivity not often present in the commercial arena of "popular songs"—i.e., "pop" songs, for profit and not for people. And while there is no clear line of distinction or demarcation always present between "pop" songs and "people's songs," and we must be careful not to create false dichotomies, consider the following possible malleable distinctions as an opening guide in the creation of people's songs:

Popular songs might sing about romance while people's songs might sing about resistance (and still appreciate and welcome romance); popular songs might sing about transgression, while people's songs might also sing about transformation; popular songs can exist primarily in the commercial sphere while people's songs can remind us of the existence and importance of the public sphere, people's struggles, and the common good; some popular songs reveal the success of capitalist civilization (as defined by the capitalists) while people's songs reflect the failure of a capitalist civilization that produces the need for people's songs in the first place; some popular songs can serve as a distraction from the troubles of life and thus serve to protect dominant systems and downplay and subdue social transformations while people's songs can remind us of the vital role that music can play in struggling for the kinds of social changes needed to fuel music as an uplifting and transformative force; some popular songs might sing about matrimonial unions while people's songs sing about the power in the union of working people; some popular songs might sing about rebellion while people's songs might also sing about revolution (a difference between singing against unfairness, injustice, and inequality and struggling to achieve fairness, justice, and equality); some popular songs celebrate cultural diversity while people's songs can also remind us that a culture of colonialism or culture of racism is an abomination to be overcome; some popular songs can be instrumental in that they serve as an instrument to serve some other end (for example, profits and celebrity) while people's songs can remind us that music can be experienced as a good in itself; pop songs, in focusing too narrowly on interpersonal love, can negate the need for social revolutionary love while people's songs can affirm the power and fundamental requirement for social revolutionary love in the struggle for self-realization; popular songs can function as a perfumed defoliant while people's songs can remind us that though they may try to bury us, we are seeds; popular songs can be used to serve capital's drive for accumulation and expansion while people's songs can be experienced for the purpose of individual and collective delight, fulfillment, and aesthetic pleasure; popular songs might sing about criminals, outlaws, and terrorists while people's songs will remind us that the real criminals and outlaws are not those robbing banks but those running and owning the banks (those who will "rob you with a fountain pen" as Woody sings in "Pretty Boy Floyd"), and the real terrorists are in the White House, Pentagon, big banks

and corporate suites; some popular songs can ground us in current realities while people's songs can also help us transcend those current realities, and provide a momentary escape into a zone of transcendence that provides a glimpse of a world of collective joy that could be realized if we sing and work collectively to make it real; some popular songs might remind us of the importance of inclusion while some people's songs will also remind us of the importance of exclusion, for example, excluding fascists and white supremacists from shaping public policies or running schools; some popular songs celebrate diversity while some people's songs also remind us that class diversity is rooted in exploitation, abuse, and dehumanizing inequality and should thus be overcome; some popular songs might call on us to subsume politics into culture as a way to hide the political while some people's songs will remind us that it is a distinct form of politics we are hoping to overcome (e.g. authoritarian) and another form of politics we are hoping to generate (e.g. substantively democratic); some popular songs might express anger in the face of injustice while people's songs might connect that anger to radicalized expressions of love for the victims of injustice; some popular songs reflect the need for variety in the world and some people's songs also reflect the need for consensus in getting rid of structural indignities such as child labor, poverty, eco-system destruction, nuclear weapons, and enslavement; some popular songs celebrate cultural differences while some people's songs also remind us of the need to abolish class differences; some popular songs might sing about the importance of embracing minorities while people's songs will also remind us to work to overcome the minority of the ruling class; some popular songs can take us into the known and familiar while people's songs can also awaken the imagination in order to venture courageously and adventurously into the unknown and unfamiliar; some popular songs can remind us of the horrors of the past and present while people's songs can also envision and embody a different and better future; some popular songs might talk about differences that produce injustice and inequality while people's songs might also sing about commonalities that produce justice and equality; some popular songs might sing about indignities rooted in identity while some people's songs might also sing about indignities rooted in cultures of poverty, militarism, and economic exploitation.

*Philosophers have sought to understand the world.
The point, however, is to change it.*

- Karl Marx, 11th Thesis on Ludwig Feuerbach

Throughout his relatively short productive life Woody Guthrie composed more than 3,000 songs, and he demonstrated powerfully what it means to be a singer-activist/activist-singer and employ the insurgent power of people's songs as part of a larger revolutionary project of political and social transformation through which it is recognized that constructing a better future is in many

ways rooted in how we come to work, think, hope, imagine, live, envision, resist, organize, construct, know, create, and sing together in the present. Woody's work captured the visionary yet soberly realistic nature of people's songs. He revealed how a combination of *realism*—seen and heard as the need to look honestly at harsh realities without falling into cynicism or fatalism—and *vision*—seen and heard as the need to see the revelatory light of potential transformations immanent in the present—inform the dynamic fullness and defiant strength of relevant people's songs. People's songs are willing to stare in the face of, reflect upon, and point fingers at the most harrowing conditions, knowing that doing so is part of the struggle in overcoming such horrifying realities. Sometimes pointing fingers is our best option, but behind the fingers are hands, and arms, and brains that must be provoked and mobilized to overcome that toward which the fingers are pointing. People's songs are too down-to-earth to be blinded by idealism, but too idealistic to fall victim to pessimism and despair suggested by dismal and sordid realities. People's songs are always historical; they live and breathe history in that they see history as an interpenetrating set of past, present, and future processes and relations (political, cultural, economic, social, ideological, biological, ecological, etc.).

When Steve Earle sings about losing the trail of Woody Guthrie so that he is lost “stumbling through the haze,” he points to the need for staying awake, alert, and attuned to those historical interpenetrations and legacies, and the down-to-earth idealism that infused Woody's people's songs. It is not a call to sentimentality about the past or nostalgia (too often heard in commercial pop songs), but a demand for a genuine radical obligation to, and critical engagement with, the past for the purpose of exciting and activating feelings of solidarity and flames of resistance required for ensuring that “a better world is coming” in the future. People's songs can do that; Woody's songs often do that.

Perhaps the authorities understand better than the singers that people's songs are dangerous, hence the marginalization (or worse, for example, the murder of Victor Jara in Chile in 1973 by Pinochet's U.S.-backed henchmen) of purveyors of people's songs. They understand what Don McLean noted: "A dangerous song is the most dangerous form of art there is; you can never kill a song." And that is why IWW bard Joe Hill believed that a song was better than a lecture—i.e., the song has staying power.

One of Woody's mentors, Ed Robbins (West Coast communist in the 1930s) said "Woody believed that what is important is the struggle of the working people to win back the earth, which is rightfully [ours]. He believed that people should love one another and organize into *One Big Union*." Woody, driven by working-class solidarity and love, was outraged that so many people were living under bridges, were unemployed, dispossessed, starving, and living in migrant camps, oppressed, exploited, and abused. Woody was singing about *what should be*—i.e., this land should belong collectively to the people, not to the anti-democratic minority ownership class, and about *what is*, the breadlines forming in the shadow of the steeple, the relief office, and the private property signs. It is, again, an example reflective of how Woody was both a rebellious singer (singing *against* what is) and a revolutionary singer (singing *for* what ought to be). Woody kept hearing Kate Smith singing "God Bless America" on the jukebox wherever he went, and everywhere Woody went he did not see people who were blessed by God or anything else, but people who were coarsened, cursed, and crushed by a brutalizing system of private ownership and control of the material and ideological means of production and distribution, the system that destroyed the commons.

Woody arguably wrote "This Land is Your Land" because "this land" is owned by the wealthy, anti-democratic minority class of owners, but in Woody's socialist/communist view of

“commonism,” that is an abomination, the obscenity of capitalism. When Woody sings of the “freedom highway” in the last verse of the song, that is his reference to socialism/communism/commonism. “Nobody living can make us turn back [from building the “freedom highway” of socialism],” is Woody’s call for engaging in the urgently needed and long-term struggle to bring the notion of the common good into reality (a point much more poignant in the age of eco-system destruction that is destroying the global commons). It is Woody’s version of: “keep fighting until we’re dying.” Woody was in line with the CIO’s “equal rights stance” in the late 1930s, a stance informed by the influence of the Communist Party—and former Wobblies in the CIO at that time). The basic point of Woody’s tune is linked to Rousseau’s line from the “Disquisition on Inequality”: “the fruits of our labor belong to us; the fruits of the earth belong to everyone; and, the earth itself belongs to no one—i.e., “this land is made for you and me.” Might it be added that this is a very Native American way of looking at things?

Woody talked about how songs are weapons. Songs, people’s songs, he suggested, can be used by slaves in the struggle for liberation from slavery; by workers in the struggle for emancipation from exploitation; and, songs, commercial songs, can be used by the ownership class to control, distract, indoctrinate, subdue, and dominate the people. Woody carried a copy of the Wobblies “Little Red Songbook” in his pocket, and shared in the Wobbly vision of what Joe Hill called “the Worker’s Commonwealth,” where workers will arise in “splendid might...take the wealth” we are always producing, because “it belongs to [us] by right”—i.e., “this land is made for you and me.” Again, Woody called it “commonism,” a world in which “there is no hunger and want because everything is shared in common.” Through that struggle for the workers commonwealth we will be “born again” in Woody’s materialist conception of the world, where

the spiritual is deeply grounded in human capacities for creativity, rebelliousness, artistry, commitment, knowledge, sensuousness, love, affection, compassion, laughter, and abundance.

As noted, Woody's mentor and comrade Ed Robbin said that Woody looked at the world and politics through a lens that directed us to struggle for the *One Big Union*, take back the earth that rightfully belongs to the workers (not the owners), and also create the conditions and provide the resources so that it is possible for people to love one another in the context of reciprocally creative and fruitful lives. Such sentiments reveal why Woody's two favorite philosophers were Jesus Christ and Karl Marx, two philosophers who understood the importance of *revolutionary love*, and who see love as necessary to create the conditions for mutual flourishing and fulfillment, mutual happiness and creativity. The lessons are revealed powerfully in Woody's song "Jesus Christ" where the rich are told to give their wealth unto the poor, and when Jesus comes to town the "workers believed what he did say" about this "commonist" ethic that works to overcome the root causes of inequality, and to embody the struggle to love one another.

Woody, like other singers of people's songs, saw himself as a political artist and as a radical educator, a contributor to what Boots Casetta called "the age long struggle for the liberation of [hu]mankind." In that struggle, we cannot ask or expect too much of the power of people's songs, but we can also not ask or expect too little. While songs have a spiritual component, they are not magic, they are always grounded in, and in some ways reflective of, the material conditions of life; people's songs are attempting to build the future, but on the materials of the present and past, as Rosa Luxemburg might put it.

Possibilities for a better future are grounded in keeping one foot in the past. We see this commitment in Woody's songs such as "Two Good Men," about Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, where in the lines "[Vanzetti] taught the workers to organize, and in the electric chair he

dies,” Woody reveals the bloody horror that faced many union organizers in the long and ongoing struggle for liberation from capital’s exploitation and abuse of labor. He also keeps alive the revolutionary spirits of Sacco and Vanzetti, much needed to sustain struggles into the future. In the “Ludlow Massacre,” where Rockefeller goons killed (burned alive) eleven children and two pregnant women in Colorado in April, 1914, as part of a larger assault on striking miners and their families, Woody keeps alive the urgently needed revolutionary spirit of the miner’s union (“God bless the mine workers’ union,” he sings) while also reminding us of the violence and repression systems of state power will employ to protect the ownership class and its interests. In “1913 Massacre,” about copper miners making “less than a dollar a day,” Woody sings “such a terrible sight I never did see...the scabs outside still laughed at their spree, and the children that died there were seventy-three,” and he keeps alive the rebellious outrage experienced by workers and families assaulted by the vicious forces of capital. In “Harriet Tubman’s Ballad,” he sings about how Abraham Lincoln only “crippled that snake of slavery; We’ve got to fight to kill him dead” and here Woody keeps alive the burning revolutionary spirit required to address and overcome all forms of exploitation, dehumanization, racism, and slavery. He starkly evokes the horrors of slavery in “Hangknot” when he sings “my brother was a slave, he tried to escape; they drug him to his grave on a hangknot.” In “Jesus Christ” Woody tells of how Jesus was laid in the grave when “he said to the rich ‘give your money to the poor,” keeping alive the exalting revolutionary spirit of Jesus and pointing to the system that creates the widening gap between rich and poor that must be overcome. There are many hundreds more songs.

David Dunaway tells us that people’s songs work mostly to “evoke not the bitterness of repression,” however brutal and traumatic that may be, “but the glory of a world remade,” and in that sense too Woody’s people’s songs carry a rebellious and revolutionary character directed

toward both understanding problems and crises and overcoming them. Woody's people's songs, whether singing against lynching, against war, against poverty, against executions, or for freedom, justice, peace, and dignity, always work as a form of mediation between the bitterness and the glory, the particular and the universal, moral argument and political engagement, crushing realities and critical dreams, individual difference and our common humanity, the *will* to fight back, the *knowledge* that fighting back is an obligation, and the *ability* to realize victories. Woody's people's songs undermine and construct, they work to undermine the injustices imposed by systems of domination and violence, and they build toward a liberated humanity, they are songs, reflective of Robeson's call to "fight until we die," that tell us we must "work in this fight and fight 'til we win," as Woody sings in "Pastures of Plenty." And in the same song he even tells us that it may be necessary to defend this land that belongs to us with our lives, expressing again "the true spirit of Christ"—i.e., the willingness to sacrifice all for justice, freedom, dignity, and humanity.

In short, whether Woody sang or wrote about realities incompatible with the principles of substantive democracy, the feudal and dehumanizing nature of capital, imprisonment, vigilantes, slavery, lynching, mine catastrophes, segregation, discrimination, massacres, wars and peace, ecological disasters, strikes and union organizing, systemic corruption, opposing fascism and tyranny, liberating women, civil rights, unrequited struggle or unrequited love, or new and better worlds, his music is rebellious and revolutionary in that it works to generate hope and glorify possibilities for liberation from oppressive and exploitative conditions that often seem hopeless and impossible to overcome. In that sense, Woody's form of people's songs is about the presence in the present of the past and future, of thought and emotion informed by reflection and inflamed by imagination.

Pete Seeger reminded us that some songs help us escape from our troubles; some songs help us understand our troubles, and some songs help us overcome our troubles. Sometimes we ask for escape because we need escape as a form of regeneration, resistance, or relaxation; sometimes we seek escape as a form of denial; sometimes we seek escape as a form of protection from the horrors of reality; sometimes we seek escape so as not to be reminded of our own crass materialism, crushed idealism, and hopeless cynicism. The need for escape should not be denigrated or dismissed. We should ask “what are the objective conditions that produce the desire for escape?” One thing it feels safe to say is that whatever power people’s songs might have to help us escape, or to understand, or to be awakened, inspired, and revolutionized, it is never enough. Despite Irwin Silber’s hopes, we will not save the world only through songs.

Woody wrote in his diary that he had a bad day because he only wrote three union songs, three people’s songs in support of and solidarity with the workers of the world. He was passionately driven to create music in the battle to keep alive and stir the flames of discontent against the forces working relentlessly to keep us tired and scared. He said that he never heard songs that told of the troubled lives and empowering struggles of working people coming out of the radio, or in the cinema, or on the jukebox—i.e., people’s songs had no space in what should be public spheres. It was as though in the wider culture working people had no history, no turmoil, no voice, no desires, no dreams, no songs...had no life. He said it was because the boss class did not want to hear about the history of people’s struggles, about the sweat and blood and toil, the fatigue and fears, about the sickness and disease, the blisters and calluses, and the struggles for the *One Big Union*, for free speech and, as Woody put it, to “construct a family of nations.” The family of nations, and the idea of the *One Big Union*, again point to Woody’s belief in “commonism”—i.e., a world where, in Woody’s Christ inspired view, the rich give all their goods to the poor,

workers control and organize workplaces, war is abolished, and citizens organize and control communities while setting social priorities and policies.

Woody's songs are prosaic and sublime, rooted in the commonplace but also transcendent. One can taste the dust, smell the blood, feel the noose, and hear the screams of agony in Woody's people's songs, as he immerses the listener in the texture of life of the toilers and victims, revealing a struggling yet resplendent humanity within the daily trials and in a hope beyond them. When in "Born Again" Woody sings of breathing in the spirit of both Jesus and John Henry, he is pointing to the idea that the spiritual is not a disembodied affair, but an approach to life through which we are connected as material beings to the rest of nature and to one another—again it is reflective of "Solidarity Forever" where the solidarity extends into the IWW call to "live in harmony with the earth." The spiritual is grounded in visions of hope and the reality of struggle, in the power of the connection between the collective human brain and hand.

In "Born Again," Woody sings of feeling at home in the universe and united with both mountains and the sky where "the great eternal moment is the great eternal dawn." In "Born Again" it is the warmth of the sun and each new day that lifts his spirit, along with the desire to support and be supported by friends and comrades in the ongoing struggle for the world of kindness and love. Transcendence is found not in some "deathly distant land" of "pearly gates," and "streets of gold," but in the comradeship and solidarity that makes us feel we can stand "above [our] troubles," and autonomously "stand on [our] two feet" with unlimited power in our collective minds and hands. Intimated strongly in the song is that we are truly "born again" through acts of solidarity, human love, and in the union Promised Land. In that "promised land" the daily fatigue and fear of the working people will be overcome.

Woody understood well that the most significant and vital questions are confronted in the material struggles of people's everyday lives, not in otherworldly disembodied realms. Woody wrote "I give myself, my heart my soul, to give some friend a hand; this morning I am born again, I'm in the Promised Land." As Bruce Springsteen says in his song "Promised Land," to "believe in the Promised Land" we must take each "moment into [our] hands" and when necessary "blow everything down" that is standing in the way of a decent existence, especially the false "dreams" and the "lies that leave [us]...lost and brokenhearted." They want us to lose our way in hopelessness, prevarications, fatigue, and fear, but we must find and construct our way in the promise of hopeful possibilities in struggle.

The sublime, that feeling of losing the self in something outside of and larger than the self only to find the self "born again" at a higher level of humanness and solidarity, can be found in the simple reality of helping one another and sharing our world in common... "the union promised land," as Woody sings. Again, it is an expression of *revolutionary love*. "The union promised land" is where we can and must "learn to love one another," and why he said that love is "the secret of secrets" necessary for overcoming "fear and greed," the two main causes of trouble in the world (in Woody's view). It is a love rooted in a basic fact of human life: we are dependent on one another for our survival, our joy, our fulfillment, our happiness, our creativity, our songs, and our well-being. This kind of *revolutionary love* (or *social love* animated by *social/historical individuals*), to which Woody is pointing, refers to the necessary desire and requisite work through which we create conditions for what Murray Bookchin called "an ethic of complementarity" grounded in a recognition that we are not equal individuals but equally individuals, and what the Cubans call "an ethic of care," where care and love are seen as both an individual and social right and duty necessary for the free and creative development of the multiple creative potentialities of

each and all. Marx called it “true wealth” or “the true realm of freedom.” For Marx, Guevara, Bookchin, Robeson, Woody, and other singers of people’s songs, this world of *revolutionary love* could not be created in a capitalist system because of the vast poverty amid massive wealth capital is structurally driven to create, the execrable gap in life possibilities between rich and poor concomitant with capitalist development.

The “great high wall,” the great obstacle to the freedom highway of socialism, with the sign that says “private property,” sung in one of what Pete Seeger calls “the good verses” from “This Land is Your Land” captures a structurally determined requirement for capital: it must remain tyrannical, it must create obstacles to human freedom, and that means capital is disqualified from producing the forms of collective time and space required to construct substantive forms of economic and political democracy—i.e., capital cannot live into the other side of the sign that “didn’t say nothing.” That side, where there is no private ownership of the means of production, was “made for you and me,” the side for cooperative production designed to satisfy human needs with a minimum of onerous labor and in ways that, these days, must be ecologically rational and environmentally sustainable.

Along with Robeson, Seeger, and other singers of people’s songs, Woody was committed to fighting until the day he was no longer able to fight. Even when suffering the harsh realities of Huntington’s Disease, in 1961, Woody handed Bob Dylan a note that said, “I ain’t dead yet”—i.e., still in the struggle! It is this spirit of tenacious resistance and visionary persistence that people’s songs can awaken, nurture, and nourish. Robeson, Seeger, and Guthrie, aware of people’s songs’ roots in harsh realities and its branches in new possibilities for a better world, dared to challenge long-held myths about U.S. commitments to peace, justice, freedom, and democracy. When Guthrie sang “why do your ships bring death and destruction...why do your death bombs

fall from my sky,” and said “I’ve got to know” because “hungry lips ask me wherever I go,” in his song “I’ve Got to Know,” he was critiquing powerfully the myth that U.S. power sends its forces to spread freedom and democracy around the world. The truth is much more abrasive: death, destruction, hunger, trauma, brutality, exploitation, misery, and poverty.

Abrasive excavation is often necessary to arrive at the truth for it is seldom left out in the open. John Steinbeck recognized Woody’s necessary abrasiveness in his search for the truth, in his fight for freedom against slavery, in his hope that somehow songs might contribute to helping us save the world. Steinbeck, writing an introduction to a book Woody put together with Pete Seeger and Alan Lomax, *Hard Hittin’ Songs for Hard Hit People*, said “there is nothing sweet about Woody, and nothing sweet about the songs he sings,” and added “but for those willing to listen there is something more important,” and that is “the will of a people to resist” systems of exploitive, oppressive and violent power and domination. Let us hope enough of us are willing to listen. *Woody lives!*

NEW YORK CITY'S COMPOSERS' COLLECTIVE: "LEFT-WING FOOL'S PARADISE"¹ OR "AMERICAN MUSICAL GENESIS"²?

JULIA SCHMIDT-PIRRO

Abstract: In response to the growing unemployment and social misery of the early Depression years, the Composers' Collective, founded in 1932–1933 in New York City, sought to make a social and political impact. Laying out the collective's theoretical and ideological ambitions, this article highlights the organization's initial agenda of political education and mass mobilization through avant-garde classical music. These efforts shifted as the collective's members realized that their outreach efforts were failing, and they changed their focus from classical avantgarde music to folk music. This article argues that despite its short existence (1932–1936), the collective fostered a theoretical discourse about the political significance of music that influenced the later works of former members (e.g., Marc Blitzstein, Earl Robinson) a new generation of political musicians (e.g., Pete Seeger), and exemplified the important role music could play in America's political stage.

The composer of the people's movement and of the collective society will utilize all the skills and techniques he has inherited from the past to write not luxury music for the few, but music which shall be of, for and about the many. His is the task of breaking down the age-old division between learned or art music on the one hand, and folk or popular music on the other. In doing this he will be helping to break down the class division which these musical divisions have symbolized and helped perpetuate. It will also be his task to unite learning and popularity into an art which must become a broad instrument of social enlightenment and change.

Elie Siegmeister³

¹ Letter from Lahn Adomian to Charles Seeger, ca. 1975, in *Ruth Crawford Seeger. A Composer's Search for American Music*, by Judith Tick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 404.

² David K. Dunaway, "Unsung Songs of Protest: The Composers' Collective of New York," *New York Folklore* 5 (Summer 1979): 9.

³ Elie Siegmeister, *Music and Society* (New York: Critics Group Press, 1938), 26, accessed Feb. 10, 2021, <https://sites.evergreen.edu/thewordintheear-fall/wp-content/uploads/sites/316/2014/09/musicAndSociety.pdf>.

If one were asked to identify instances in U.S. history when music was used to effect political change, chances are that one would think immediately of the folk music tradition and its influence on the labor and peace struggles of the 1960s or of the role of African American spirituals and gospel music in the Civil Rights Movement. In those eras of heightened political consciousness, artists used their music to promote significant changes in American politics and society. Such songs as “We Shall Overcome,” “This Little Light of Mine,” and “Where Have All the Flowers Gone,” come easily to mind as songs with lyrics and melodies familiar to millions of Americans and that remain in the memory of those who participated in or witnessed the anti-war and Civil Rights movements and of those with special interest in those movements and their music. The performers of that generation, including Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, and Joan Baez enjoy wide name recognition to this day. This is not the case for musicians Earl Robinson or Marc Blitzstein, who were intensely involved in trying to employ music as a vehicle of political change in the 1930s and 1940s. Neither do the political compositions of their colleagues written amid the Depression resonate today: “Into the Streets May First” (Aaron Copland) “Chinaman, Laundryman” (Ruth Crawford Seeger), “Lenin, Who’s That Guy” (Charles Seeger). Politically engaged composers such as Aaron Copland and Ruth Crawford Seeger remain familiar in the context of American classical music but are no longer associated with the progressive ideology that once infused their work.

This article argues that the efforts of these classical artists should not only be remembered for the aesthetic and political contributions they made to mid-twentieth-century American music and politics but also for the legacy and mechanisms they made available for use by politically engaged musicians of the 1960s. In several important respects, such classical music composers as Robinson, Blitzstein, and Copland laid the groundwork for later uses of the folk and classical music

traditions in the service of political and social change. This article focuses on the contributions of the Composers' Collective (CC), a loosely organized group of classical music composers based in New York City in the 1930s—among them Robinson, Blitzstein and Copland—which carried on vigorous discussions about how music could be enlisted in the cause of progressive politics and supported the composition and performance of music for the people. The efforts of the collective, it will be argued, helped form the groundwork for the fruitful and effective deployment of music in the cultural and political movements of later years, especially the 1960s.

The Beginnings

In the mid-1920s and early 1930s, the professional musical landscape of the United States began to undergo a significant change. Many American classical avant-garde composers, who had previously left the United States, returned from Europe. They had spent the early 1920s in Paris or Berlin, to get exposure to cutting-edge music and to escape from a stifling artistic atmosphere in the United States. One of these exiles, Virgil Thomson, explains:

“I was ...leaving an America that was beginning to enclose us all, at least those among us who needed to ripen unpushed. America was impatient with us, trying always to take us in hand and make u a success, or else squeezing us dry for exhibiting in an institution.”⁴

Driven back home by the falling value of the American dollar and, later by the rising tide of fascism, many of these composers, including Aaron Copland, Virgil Thomson, Roger Sessions, George Antheil, and Marc Blitzstein, settled in New York City, where they hoped to make careers as composers. It was not easy. In a December 16, 1933, letter to the Mexican composer Carlos

⁴ Virgil Thomson, *An Autobiography by Virgil Thomson* (New York: Dutton Paperback, 1985), 74.

Chávez, Copland noted the sense of disconnection not only between returning composers but also between them and American audiences:

Everyone is in New York—Varèse, Antheil, Roy Harris, Sessions, Cowell etc.—but the feeling of camaraderie is not strong...Here in the US we composers have no possibility of directing the musical affairs of the nation – on the contrary, since my return, I have the impression that we are working in a vacuum. There seems to me less than ever a real rapport between the public and the composers and of course that is a very important way of creating an audience, and being in contact with an audience.⁵

Copland's desire for composers to have more influence on musical affairs and to establish a rapport with audiences was made all the more urgent by the effects of the Great Depression. It had struck New York City's immigrant and native working-class populations particularly hard. The difficult social and economic conditions of the time, combined with the city's rich tradition (both native and imported) of socialist debate and agitation, served to raise the prestige of the Communist Party, especially in intellectual and artistic circles. Composer Conlon Nancarrow (born 1912), who joined the Communist Party in Boston, points to the prominent position the party held in New York City, where it was fashionable for intellectuals to become party members: "in New York, everyone at one time or another was in [the party]."⁶ A 1936 letter from George Antheil, the "bad boy" of music in the 1920s who provoked controversy with his unconventional *Ballet Mécanique*, to his longtime patron Marie Louise Curtis Bok reveals the circumstances composers faced during this time and why they were drawn to an institution such as the CC. While stipulating that he did not approve of communism, he expressed appreciation for the support composers were getting from the "communistic movement" in the form of concerts, financial support and subsidies. As a result

⁵ Aaron Copland and Vivian Perlis, *Copland. 1900 through 1942* (New York: St. Martin's/ Marek, 1984), 222.

⁶ William Duckworth, *Talking Music. Conversations with John Cage, Philip Glass, Laurie Anderson, and Five Generations of American Experimental Composers* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1995), 38.

of this support, “practically all of our important young composers have gone over to this movement, and are some part of it, or at least belong to the Composers’ Collective.” He goes on to describe the rolls of the CC as including Varèse, Copland, Cowell, Siegmeister, Blitzstein, and “at least two dozen more.” He concludes by highlighting the lack of support for musical compositions in the United States: “I mention this only to show the great significance of the fact that creative music remains unsupported in America and the bitterness that is manifested in its youngest and finest creative talents.”⁷

Out of the context of economic depression and left-wing ferment emerged the Composers’ Collective, a short-lived and unique organization dedicated to the tasks of finding, and connecting with, a working-class audience, of creating a supportive circle of peers for the exchange of ideas, and of actively responding to the hardships of the times by promoting a leftist political agenda of social justice. Founded in the early 1930s by a group of highly educated, classically trained composers, the collective was an offshoot of a Communist Party–affiliated political organization, the Pierre Degeyter Club.⁸ The Pierre Degeyter Club formed a wing of the Workers’ Music League, founded in 1931, as the U.S. section of the International Music Bureau. The league exercised its influence through its twenty branch organizations in Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York City. In this last city, league activities were particularly vigorous, supporting between eighteen and twenty workers’ musical organizations, including choruses, bands and orchestras. Testifying to the diversity of New York City’s immigrant culture, these musical

⁷ Antheil letter to Ms. Bok, March 12, 1936, George Antheil correspondence with Mary Louise Curtis Bok, 1921 - 1940 (Music Division, Library of Congress) ML 31.A59.. Box-Folder 2/1-13 (1931-1940)
<https://hdl.loc.gov/loc.music/eadmus.mu010018>

Thanks to Mauro Piccinini for calling my attention to this quote.

⁸ Copland and Perlis, *Copland*, 223.

organizations were organized by immigrant nationality and performed in their native language.⁹ The principle under which all these organizations were formed was “Music for the Masses.”¹⁰ While “frictions and disagreements increased during the years of the CC,” members of the collective never completely broke with the party.¹¹ Connected indirectly to the party through the Pierre Degeyter Club and the Workers’ Music League, collective members could be more independent and cultivate a more politically diverse membership than was possible in either the club or the league.

Basic facts about the CC are hard to establish definitively because historians disagree about important dates and facts relating to the group, including the identities of its members.¹² Carol Oja lists Henry Cowell, Charles Seeger, Janet Barnes, Norman Cazden, Henry Leland Clarke, Aaron Copland, Earl Robinson, Jacob Schaefer, Elie Siegmeister, Lan Adomián, Irwin Heilner, Herbert Haufrecht, Wallingford Riegger, and Marc Blitzstein as members.¹³ Another musicologist, Ann Pescatello, includes the expatriate avant-garde composer George Antheil, Ruth Crawford-Seeger (the wife of Charles Seeger), and the German composer Hanns Eisler, a former student of avant-garde composer Arnold Schoenberg, whose Communist Party affiliation was the strongest.¹⁴ David Dunaway points out that George Antheil and Aaron Copland were only

9 Ann M. Pescatello, *Charles Seeger. A Life in American Music* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992), 113.

10 Serge R. Denisoff, *Great Day Coming: Folk Music and the American Left* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971), 42.

11 Copland and Perlis, *Copland*, 223.

12 The founding date of the collective remains unclear, with some accounts (e.g., Dunaway, Copland/Perlis) listing 1931 and others (Zuck 1980, Reuss 1971, and Cohen) giving 1932 [David K. Dunaway, “Unsung Songs of Protest: The Composers’ Collective of New York,” *New York Folklore* 5 (Summer 1979): 1–19; Copland and Perlis, *Copland*, 223; Richard Reuss, “The Roots of American Left-wing Interest in Folksong” *Labor History* 12 (1971): 259–79, doi: 10.1080/00236567108584164; Barbara Zuck *A History of Musical Americanism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1980); Ronald D. Cohen *Rainbow Quest. The Folk Music Revival and American Society, 1940–1970* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 21].

13 Carol Oja, “Marc Blitzstein’s ‘The Cradle Will Rock’ and Mass-Song Style of the 1930’s,” *Musical Quarterly* 73 (1989): 447.

14 Pescatello, *Charles Seeger*, 111.

occasional visitors of the CC while Eisler addressed the group on several occasions. He also includes the composers George Maynard, Robert Gross, Alec North, and Herman Chauloff as members of the CC.¹⁵

While Hans Eisler's status as a permanent member of the group is unclear, he was an important role model for the CC and their mission. A close collaborator of the German writer Bertolt Brecht and a former student of Arnold Schoenberg, he composed political songs such as the "Solidaritätslied" (Solidarity Song) and "Einheitsfront" (Unity Front) which were published and performed all over the world. On his first trip to the United States from February to May of 1935, Eisler visited New York City and attended meetings of the CC, taking active part in their discussions.¹⁶ He continued his tour to Boston and other cities across the country and ended up in Los Angeles. During his stay in the United States, he conducted choral performances, lectured on culture and fascism, and performed his political songs together with the young baritone, Mordecai Bauman (himself playing the piano).¹⁷

Eisler's speech "Music in Crisis" delivered on December 7, 1935, at New York's Town Hall, is believed to have had a major impact on the CC.¹⁸ Other speakers that evening included Aaron Copland and Henry Cowell. The importance of Eisler's work can be traced in the CC's publication *New Workers' Song Book* (1934), which offered twenty-two songs modeled on Eisler's work.¹⁹ In a review of the *Workers Song Book 2* which appeared in the *Daily Worker*, Blitzstein praised Eisler's songs for providing "freshness of harmony" and "emotional drive" and for being

¹⁵ Dunaway, "Unsung Songs of Protest," 2.

¹⁶ Oja, "Marc Blitzstein's 'The Cradle Will Rock' and Mass-Song Style of the 1930's," 452.

¹⁷ In May 1935, Bauman became the first singer to make a recording of Eisler songs in the United States. Eisler's tour ended with an invitation to return in the fall as a guest lecturer for the New School for Social Research

¹⁸ Pescatello, *Charles Seeger*, 112. The lecture was later published by the left-wing Downtown Music School in the spring of 1936. See Oja, "Marc Blitzstein's 'The Cradle Will Rock' and Mass-Song Style of the 1930's," 452).

¹⁹ Pescatello, *Charles Seeger*, 115.

“unconventional in a manner to attract workers, not repel them.”²⁰ Another admirer was the CC member Earl Robinson: “I learned much from the best mass songs of those days; in minor keys, they came from the German antifascists Hanns Eisler and Bertolt Brecht.” He met Eisler in New York and later took lessons from him in California.²¹

Aaron Copland was another figure closely associated with the CC but whose membership status remains unclear. According to Elizabeth B. Crist, the composer might not have attended many meetings, but he still moved in the same circles of other, more permanent members of the CC. In November 1934, for example, Copland, together with Roy Harris, Elie Siegmeister, and Charles Seeger, presented a panel, “The Problems of the Composer in Modern Society,” at the Degeyer Club.²²

An authoritative list of the collective may not exist partly because of shifts in membership over the years but nevertheless it becomes clear that if one includes long-term members, collaborators, and supporters, the tally of composers is relatively high. Another relevant factor making it difficult to put together a member list was that some composers were writing under pseudonyms. Ellie Siegmeister, for example, went by the pseudonym, L. E. Swift, Charles Seeger went by Carl Sand, and Henry Leland Clarke took the assumed name Jonathan Fairbanks.²³ This impulse toward disguise sometimes led to confusion. Siegmeister records that, “I took the name L. E. Swift, but sometimes I’d forget which name I was using. One time I was listed on a program as Swift conducting the Daily Workers Chorus in an arrangement by Siegmeister!”²⁴

20 Oja, “Marc Blitzstein’s ‘The Cradle Will Rock’ and Mass-Song Style of the 1930’s,” 453.

21 Earl Robinson, *Ballad of an American. The Autobiography of Earl Robinson* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 1998), 68.

22 Elizabeth Bergman Crist, *Music for the Common Man. Aaron Copland during the Depression and War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 23.

23Pescatello also mentions Stefan Wolpe (Volpe) and Jeannette Barnett (Janet Barnes), S. C. Riegger (S. C. Richards) (See Pescatello, *Charles Seeger*, 224).

24Copland and Perlis, *Copland*, 224.

The use of pseudonyms along with the ambiguities in the historical record suggest that the members intended to hide, to an extent, the trail of their politically motivated involvement in the collective. Memories of the post–World War I Red Scare had not altogether faded. Eventually the concern of many members of being too identified with the Left was borne out by the resurgence of anti-Communist sentiment in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Clarke testified to this concern when he pointed out that, “It was dangerous to belong to the collective, and even more dangerous later on to have been connected with it.”²⁵ Another alumnus of the CC, Charles Seeger, bluntly refused to answer when a music historian asked him to identify other members. His only comment was, “That is what I never say!”²⁶

According to one account, the CC was started by Jacob Schaefer, Leon Charles, and Henry Cowell after the three had given a seminar on writing songs for the masses.²⁷ Charles Seeger later claimed that Schaefer and Cowell (as well as Copland) were only “friends” of the collective but not members.²⁸ In an interview, Seeger suggested that his decision to join was undertaken very informally:

One night in December or January [1931], Henry Cowell came in and said, “You know, Charlie, (you were worried about the connection of music and society back there in Berkeley;) there’s a little group of good musicians who are moved by the Depression and are trying to make music that can go right into the streets and be used in protests and at union meetings. I think you might be interested in it.” And I was.²⁹

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid., 223.

27 Ibid.

28 Pescatello, *Charles Seeger*, 116.

29 David K. Dunaway, “Charles Seeger and Carl Sands: The Composers’ Collective Years,” *Ethnomusicology* 24 (May 1980): 161, doi: 10.2307/851110.

Henry Leland Clarke another member of the Collective suggested that the organization “grew out of a seminar in the writing of mass songs organized in 1933.”³⁰ As Seeger’s recollection of Henry Cowell’s remarks suggest, the devastating social and economic impacts of the Depression motivated many of the CC’s members, who gathered weekly in lower Manhattan amid the proliferating bread lines. Hoping that their musical activities might have some effect against social injustice and mass immiseration, composers usually met on Friday at 5:30³¹ and/or Saturday afternoons at 5430 Sixth Avenue in an old loft where there was an upright piano.³² At these gatherings, each member would present a composition and then receive criticism, both in terms of the music’s possible social and political impact and in terms of its musical techniques.³³ In animated discussions, members tried to discover a worker-friendly classical music composed in a style both appealing and accessible to non-musicians. Yet, at the same time, the composers sought to incorporate the latest avant-garde compositional and performance techniques. For inspiration, the CC members looked to Russian and German workers songs.

In a newsletter published by the *American Music League*, Marc Blitzstein, secretary of the collective, listed the group’s aims as:

(...) the writing of (1) Mass Songs, dealing with immediate social issues... to be sung at meetings, on parades, and on picket lines; (2) Choral music for professional as well as non-professional choruses, dealing in a broader way with the social scene... (3) Solo songs, on social themes to be sung at meetings and concentrate the attention on the subjective, private emotions to the exclusion of the realistic

30 H. L. Clark “Composers’ Collective of New York” *Grove Music Dictionary Online* (2001), ed. Laura Macy, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic>, accessed on Feb. 10, 2021. Musicologist and composer Norman Cazden, also a member of the group, recalled the same date as Seeger, 1931. See Dunaway, “Unsung Songs of Protest,” 1.

31 Crist, *Music for the Common Man*, 23.

32 Copland and Perlis, *Copland*, 223. The headquarters of the collective was 47 East 12th Street. The Degeyter Club was on East 19th Street. *Ibid.*

33 Interview with Norman Cazden, June 17, 1976, in Dunaway, “Unsung Songs of Protest: The Composers’ Collective of New York,” 1979, p. 4.

social questions. (4) Instrumental music, to carry on the best musical traditions of the past, now threatened by the collapse of bourgeois culture...³⁴

Especially interesting in this declaration are the third and fourth points. Both kinds of music mentioned here—solo (art) songs and instrumental music—are supposed to fulfill purposes—concentrating attention on “subjective, private emotions to the exclusion of the realistic social questions” and placing emphasis on pure (instrumental) music and musical values—that seem to conflict with the collective’s leftist aims by undercutting the propagandistic value of music. According to Robinson, these last two points of the collective’s agenda were a cause for ongoing discussions in the group: “We spent an awful lot of time talking about whether pure music, that is, instrumental music, could be useful for our purposes. I said no, and Seeger agreed with me.”³⁵

Disagreements over the extent to which composers would have to compromise their classical music standards came to a head during and after a musical competition sponsored by the left-wing magazine, *New Masses*. Asked for submissions, members of the collective submitted songs composed to Alfred Hayes’ poem “Into the Streets May First.” Composers who submitted contributions included Lahn Adohmyan, Aaron Copland, Isadore Freed, Wallingford Riegger, Carl Sands (Charles Seeger), Mitya Stillman, L. E. Swift (Ellie Siegmeister) and one composer who signed with the name “XYZ.” Aaron Copland’s composition was unanimously chosen for the first prize and “sung by hundreds of men and women rallying at Union Square that day.”³⁶ *New Masses* writer Ashley Pettis approvingly described how the composition fused the “unfamiliar, ‘experimental’ nature of harmonies” with a more traditional musical style. Largely agreeing with the spirit of the collective’s statement of aims, Pettis emphasized the value of tradition and the importance of composing music that was both demanding and elevated:

(...) it is absolutely necessary at the stage in the creation of the mass songs, to preserve the best of the old traditions, harmonic and melodic, at the same time

³⁴Copland and Perlis, *Copland*, 383.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Eric A. Gordon, *Mark the Music: The Life and Work of Marc Blitzstein* (St. Martin’s Press: New York, 1989), 91.

injecting new life into these old forms so that the most unsophisticated singer may be drawn into the singing—in order that “he who runs” may sing!³⁷

Charles Seeger, however, was less than sympathetic toward Copland’s song. For him, it was inadequate because it did not include enough musical material that might be both familiar and accessible to its target audience. It had some “freak modulations, and some big skips of sevenths in it, had some dissonances, key changes all over the place.” He challenged the jury’s decision and was reported to have asked Copland:

(..) do you think it will ever be sung on the picket line? And anyway, who would carry a piano into the streets May First or any time? (...) take mine, for instance. I haven’t tried to make a piece of music I admire. I tried to write a piece of music that I think might be sung on the picket line. Do you think there is anybody in New York who couldn’t join in with this the second time they hear it?³⁸

The composer Jacob Schaefer, who was the director of the Jewish chorus “Freiheit Gesang Ferein” ([Freedom Singing Group] the precursor to the United Jewish Peoples’ Order Folk Singers) and the director of a mandolin orchestra, voiced similar concerns. Like Seeger, he was very critical of music too difficult to be sung or played by the working-class members of his chorus and orchestra.³⁹ And he subscribed to Seeger’s doubts about the appeal and effectiveness of Copland’s version of “Into the Streets May First.”⁴⁰

Initially, members of the collective seemed to have shared both a belief in music that was demanding and of high musical quality and a prejudice against folk music. This initial embrace of a high-culture view of music probably had much to do with their educational backgrounds. Most of the composers of the collective were thoroughly trained classical musicians with degrees from prestigious European and American schools, who had refined their skills, studying with famous

³⁷Ashley Pettis, “Marching with a Song,” *New Masses*, May 1, 1934, pp. 16–17.

³⁸Copland and Perlis, *Copland*, 225.

³⁹Ibid., 224.

⁴⁰Pescatello, *Charles Seeger*, 117.

composers overseas (Blitzstein with Schoenberg in Berlin, Copland with Nadja Boulanger in Paris). Only after becoming involved with the musical activities of working-class communities and growing dissatisfied with the ineffectiveness of their outreach did members shift their approach. Earl Robinson gives an account of the theoretical struggles and developments the group underwent: “We spent an awful lot of time talking about whether pure music, that is instrumental music, could be useful to our purposes. I said no, and Seeger agreed with me. None of us used folk music at all until he and I started pushing it in 1934 and ‘35.”⁴¹

It was not only for cultural reasons that the members of the CC initially felt that folk music was an inappropriate musical source for protest songs. They actively rejected it for its perceived political deficiencies as becomes clear in the foreword to the *Workers’ Songbook no. 1* (1934), which indirectly criticizes folk music for possessing such qualities as “defeatist melancholy, morbidity, hysteria and triviality.”⁴² In their vigorous reaction against folk music, the collective also manifested the influence of Eisler, who, in line with Communist Party beliefs of the early 1930s, did not consider folk music an appropriate source to be used for revolutionary art forms.⁴³ Finally, as young American composers, many of whom belonged to the Lost Generation, they associated folk music with American provincialism and philistinism. Taking this viewpoint, the composers tended to emphasize the boundaries between classical and folk genres.

By the mid-1930s, the group began to reassess its evaluation of folk music and traditions. In 1934, Lahn Adohmyan published an article in the *Daily Worker* in which he proposed to enrich the workers’ choruses repertoire by including “Negro songs of protest, work songs, railroad songs

⁴¹Copland and Perlis, *Copland*, 224.

⁴² *Workers Song Book* no. 1 (New York: Workers Music League, USA Section of International Music Bureau, 1934).

⁴³ Dunaway, “Unsung Songs of Protest,” 7.

[and] cowboy and hill songs.”⁴⁴ Seeger reports that his change of mind toward folk music was helped along when he and Cowell were asked to evaluate John Lomax’s book manuscript, “American Ballads and Folk Songs,” for possible publication by the Macmillan Press. Fascinated by the unique way music and words were woven together in this collected volume, he enthusiastically recommended its publication. According to Seeger his evolving attitude toward folk music was further stimulated by the Kentucky folksinger and militant organizer for the National Miner’s Union, Aunt Molly Jackson, who visited the CC three times between 1933 and 1934.⁴⁵ There are conflicting reports about whether she performed at those meetings. According to Dunaway, who interviewed Seeger as well as other members of the collective, Jackson was never asked to perform for the collective. The collective’s members “found her musically illiterate.”⁴⁶ Filene, on the other hand, reports that Jackson actually sang some of her strike songs based on traditional melodies at a CC meeting and, in return, the members of the CC performed some of their compositions (but he does not list a source for this report). According to Filene, the exchange did not result in greater mutual understanding or sympathy.⁴⁷

Seeger could have heard her songs outside the collective. Unlike other members of the CC, Seeger was regularly exposed to authentic folk music as a faculty member at the New School for Social Research. He recalls first hearing folk music at the university in 1931. By the mid-1930s, he was incorporating folksongs in his lectures at the New School.⁴⁸ Whatever the specific

⁴⁴ Lahn Adohmyan, “What Songs Should Workers’ Choruses Sing?,” *Daily Worker*, Feb. 7, 1934, p. 5.

⁴⁵ Dunaway, “Unsung Songs of Protest,” 6.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk. Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 69.

⁴⁸ Dunaway, “Unsung Songs of Protest,” 6, 9.

circumstances might have been, Seeger remembers Jackson's music as influencing him to change his attitude towards folk music:

I learned her songs and discovered that they were folk songs simply dolled up, with new words and perhaps a few touches of her own, and that the people could sing their songs and they couldn't sing our songs. So I went up to her and I said, Mollie [sic], you're on the right track and we're on the wrong track and I gave up the Collective.⁴⁹

Seeger and others' reassessment of folk music was further encouraged by a growing movement to document the folk music tradition in the United States. By the 1930s, Carl Sandburg's *American Songbag* (1927) had become popular. In 1933, other folk song collections had become available including George Pullen Jackson's *White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands*, a study of shape-note singing and in 1934 Alan Lomax's *American Ballads and Folk Songs*. An additional factor in the CC's shifting taste was Communist Party criticism. In 1934, Mike Gold, a regular columnist for the American Communist Party's propaganda organ, *The Daily Worker*, reproached the music of the CC for being "full of geometric bitterness and the angles and glass splinters of pure technic (sic)...written for an assortment of mechanical canaries." Attacking their elitism, he argued that members of the CC could learn from songwriters who "make revolution as intimate and simple as 'Old Black Joe.'"⁵⁰

The growing openness of the collective members towards folk sources was also reflected in the group's musical publications. While the first two volumes of the *Worker's Songbook* include only three compositions based on American folk and popular songs, the third volume, "Songs of the People," relies heavily on folk music, with nearly half of the songs of folk or popular origin.

⁴⁹ Pescatello, *Charles Seeger*, 135n45 (Charles Seeger dictated to Peggy Seeger Cohen, April 22, 1977).

⁵⁰ Mike Gold "Change the World Column ("The Steam Hammer"), *Daily Worker*, June 11, 1934, p. 5. Cited in Dunaway, "Unsung Songs of Protest," 12.

The Collective's engagement with folk music traditions became so substantial that more than one musicologist has sought to link the organization to the birth of the folk song movement of the late 1930s and 1940s.⁵¹ As we will see, the fusion of classical and folk genres undertaken by members of the CC on theoretical and practical levels proved to be fruitful for future developments of American protest music.

According to Dunaway, the collective disbanded by the end of 1936.⁵² (H. L. Clarke pushes the CC's demise to the end of 1938.)⁵³ The Seegers left New York for Washington in 1935.⁵⁴ Henry Cowell left the group that same year. Aaron Copland, winner of the "Into the Streets May First" song competition, also decided to move on and dedicate himself to developing his own musical style.⁵⁵ His original wish to combine serious musical achievement with a political mission of promoting social progress remaining unfulfilled, Copland articulated his rising frustration in an article published by the *American Mercury* in 1935: "It is not even now appreciated that a serious and important composer functions among us; nor, as a man, is he properly understood...It cannot be doubted that he occupies little or no place even today in the mind of the public at large."⁵⁶

Several factors led to the demise of this short-lived organization. There was the group's initial failure to understand the tension inherent in employing bourgeois art music for proletarian causes. Haufrecht, another member of the CC, characterized the ambition of trying to compose

51 Oja, "Marc Blitzstein's 'The Cradle Will Rock' and Mass-Song Style of the 1930's," 459.

52 Dunaway "Unsung Songs of Protest," 13.

53 H. L. Clarke, "Composers' Collective of New York," *Grove Music Dictionary Online*.

54 Judith Tick, *Ruth Crawford Seeger. A Composer's Search for American Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 233.

55 Copland and Perlis, *Copland*, 224.

56 Aaron Copland, "The American Composer Gets a Break," *American Mercury* 35 (April 1935): 488-92.

progressive music in the idiom of avant-garde music as “schizophrenic.”⁵⁷ Dunaway explains the CC’s lack of attentiveness as stemming from the CC’s ignorance of folk and popular music which left it without a “musical and cultural base for the popular revolutionary songs it desired to compose.”⁵⁸ Yet another reason for the dissolution of the collective was that some of the composers who valued creative independence eventually lost enthusiasm for party-line political work, which became more and more propaganda-oriented. Intimidation by government agents, who according to Seeger, were watching the collective also cannot be discounted as a factor in the group’s demise.⁵⁹

Forging Different Paths from the CC: Earl Robinson, Marc Blitzstein, Charles Seeger and Pete Seeger

Several prominent members of the CC went on to make major contributions as politically engaged musicians, each of them focusing his energy and dedication in a different area of music. This article examines the popular compositions of Earl Robinson as well as the musical theatre compositions of Marc Blitzstein. In addition to influencing deeply the musical landscape of their time, the works of these CC members and affiliates shaped the approaches and views of a later generation of musicians. So, for example, Charles Seeger’s pioneering “field” work and his extensive reflections on the interrelationship between music and politics permanently marked the artistic aspirations of his son, Pete Seeger.

Over three decades, Earl Robinson became a key figure in the field of politically conscious music. Having studied composition at the University of Washington, where he received a Bachelor

⁵⁷ Dunaway “Unsung Songs of Protest,” 7.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 11–12.

⁵⁹ Pescatello, *Charles Seeger*, 115.

of Music and teaching certificate, he went on to New York City in 1934 in the hopes of landing a job. In the city, he continued his studies with Copland and Eisler, who strongly shaped his musical style and aspirations. Many of the works Robinson composed after his membership with the CC won popular acclaim and reached a wide audience. One of them, the ballad, “I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill Last Night,” written in 1936—also referred to as “Joe Hill”—used lyrics by Alfred Hayes to focus on the historic figure of Joe Hill, an IWW organizer, who, despite a lack of evidence, was convicted of murder. An activist, songwriter and poet, Hill was condemned to death and executed in 1915. The story of a man dedicated to the arts and to social justice, who was wrongly convicted and executed sparked renewed interest during the Sixties. Paul Robeson and Pete Seeger each performed “Joe Hill” on many occasions. However, it was Joan Baez’s performance of the song at Woodstock in 1969 which brought it to wide popular attention.

In 1939, Robinson composed a cantata, “Ballad for Americans,” which celebrated diversity and criticized the inequality and lack of democracy in American life reached levels of popularity similar to those reached by Joe Hill.⁶⁰ Performed by Paul Robeson, during a CBS radio broadcast in 1939, the composition won immediate acclaim. Its wide appeal became manifest when it was used as a theme song at both the Republican and Communist Party national conventions in 1940. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, Robinson started working in film music, always choosing films with progressive political messages. In 1937, for example he and CC member Alex North collaborated on the music for the 1937 film *People of the Cumberland*, a documentary produced with the cooperation of the Highlander Folk School and the people of Cumberland. Featuring music partly performed by the American People’s Chorus,⁶¹ the film featured the landscape and

⁶⁰ It was first performed by Paul Robeson was immediately recorded and sold more than 30,000 copies within one year.

⁶¹ Robinson *Ballad of an American*, 74–75.

social customs of the area as well as the residents' extreme poverty and sought to demonstrate how labor unions could improve life for mill and coal workers.⁶² Two years later, in 1939, Robinson provided the music for the documentary *United Action*, which depicted the 1936 strike at General Motors in Detroit. For one particularly brutal scene of police strike-breaking, he chose "a soprano solo singing a sweet, ironic "My Country 'Tis of Thee."⁶³

In 1943, Robinson turned to film and in 1945, he had a breakthrough when his 1942 song "The House I Live In," with lyrics by Lewis Allan, gained national attention when Frank Sinatra performed it for the Oscar-winning eponymously titled Hollywood short movie.⁶⁴ Robinson recognized Sinatra's special talent for combining a unique musicality with an ability to successfully bring across the meaning of the lyrics: Sinatra's "style and phrasing, his putting across the sense of a lyric, are unequalled."⁶⁵ The song became extremely popular, earning Robinson a "Certificate of Special Award from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Science" during the eighteenth Academy Awards in 1946.⁶⁶

While the plot of the film is explicitly focused on the subject of religious prejudice, the song expresses a wider utopian vision of an America truly free and just. Focused on religious and racial prejudice, the song also expresses a utopian vision of American solidarity and freedom.⁶⁷ The film was shown in various settings, including churches and high schools all over the country. A contemporary report offers insight into the film's impact. According to Hans Kafka's 1946

⁶² *People of the Cumberland*, <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ma01/huffman/frontier/people.html>, accessed Feb. 10, 2021.

⁶³ Robinson, *Ballad of an American*, 75.

⁶⁴ *The House I Live In*, prod. Frank Ross and Mervyn LeRoy; dir. Mervyn LeRoy; screenplay by Albert Maltz (RKO Radio). "The House I Live In," music by Earl Robinson, lyrics by Lewis Allan (RKO Radio).

⁶⁵ Robinson, *Ballad of an American*, 157.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 155. See lyrics in Appendix.

⁶⁷ The lyricist of the song, Lewis Allan (alias Abel Meeropol), is also the author of the lyrics of the anti-lynching song "Strange Fruit," made famous by Billie Holiday.

column “Hollywood Calling...” which appeared in the German-Jewish émigré journal *Aufbau*, the film’s message bore some fruit:

Frank Sinatra’s crusade against racial intolerance was again regarded with skepticism when he failed to bring to reason the pupils of Froebel Highschool in Gary, Indiana, who struck [sic] in protest against their colored schoolmates, but his picture *The House I Live In*, now being shown in churches, civic centers, highschools [sic], etc., begins to bear fruit. Communities in New Hampshire, Illinois, Connecticut, and Massachusetts decided to invite negro children from Harlem for summer vacations and the tide of this wonderful idea, directly suggested by the picture, is still mounting. *The House I Live In*, incidentally, is shown either free, or for an admission charge which goes to agencies promoting good will between people of different race and religion. [...]68

During the Red Scare of the 1950s, Robinson’s song came under ideological attack but was revived more than thirty years later by Sinatra, who sang it during the national televised centenary celebration of the Statue of Liberty in 1986, attended by President Ronald Reagan. The checkered performance history of the “House I Live In” exemplifies the thesis of a 2002 article in the *Nation*, “Patriotism’s Secret History,” in which authors Peter Dreier and Dick Flacks make the point that most Americans are unaware of the left-wing origins of many of the icons and symbols that have shaped American patriotic culture. Referring to Sinatra’s performance of Robinson’s song “The House I Live In,” they remark: “Only a handful of Americans could have grasped the political irony of that moment: Sinatra performing a patriotic anthem written by blacklisted writers to a President, who as head of Screen Actors Guild in the 1950s, helped create Hollywood’s purge of radicals. Sinatra’s own left-wing (and nearly blacklisted past), and the history of the song itself, have been obliterated from public memory.”69 With the rise of McCarthyism, Robinson became a target because of his ties to the Communist Party. He was blacklisted in 1950 and put on the Red

68 Hans Kafka, “What’s New?,” *Aufbau* 5 (Feb. 1946): 17, cited in Hans Kafka, *Hollywood Calling. Die Aufbau-Kolumne zum Film Exil* (Hamburg: ConferencePoint Verlag, 2002), 113.

69 Peter Dreier and Dick Flacks, “Patriotism’s Secret History,” *Nation*, June 3, 2002, p. 2, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/patriotisms-secret-history/>, accessed Feb. 10, 2021.

Channels list (issued by the right-wing journal *Counterattack*), together with other former members and associates of the CC, Copland, and Blitzstein, and asked to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). The blacklisting would make it impossible for him to find film work for twenty years.

Unable to find work in the movie industry, he turned to the stage. Together with three other blacklisted artists from the film industry, he composed the music for “Sandhog” (1952), a folk opera which adapted the short story “St. Columbia and the River” by Theodore Dreiser. The texts were provided by the blacklisted screenwriter Waldo Salt, and the show was directed by the blacklisted actor Howard Da Silva, who had played the role of “Larry Forman” in Blitzstein’s infamous first premier of “The Cradle Will Rock” in 1937. This politically engaged opera focused on the class struggle of the “sandhogs” (a slang term for urban miners or construction workers who worked on subways, sewers, water tunnels, and other projects underground). Premiering on November 23, 1954, it had a successful run of forty-eight shows. Some of the opera’s titles, including “Johnny’s Cursing Song,” “Work Song,” “Sweat Song,” and “Fugue on a Hot Afternoon in a Small Flat,” manifest the fusion of “lowbrow and highbrow” elements that characterized Robinson’s approach. Critics focused on the artistic achievement of the opera, to the exclusion of the piece’s political content.⁷⁰

By the late 1950s, Robinson was searching for work in school systems. From 1957 to 1966, he chaired the music department at Elisabeth Irwin High School. His educational work followed a 1954 composition in which he focused on the politically controversial subject of racial segregation in schools. Created in 1954 in the wake of the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of*

⁷⁰ Keith Newlin, ed., *A Theodore Dreiser Encyclopedia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2003), 5.

Education decision, “Black and White” was composed to lyrics by David Arkin. The piece became a huge hit in 1972 when it was recorded and performed in a pop version by the group “Three Dog Night,” selling more than a million copies.

The ink is black, the page is white
Together we learn to read and write
A child is black, a child is white
The whole world looks upon the sight, a beautiful sight.

*

Marc Blitzstein, who pursued a path of politically engaged music in musical theatre, started out as a child piano prodigy in Philadelphia. In the early 1920s, he studied composition with Nadja Boulanger and Arnold Schoenberg, in Paris and Berlin, respectively. During his years in the collective, Blitzstein altered his style substantially. Initially, Blitzstein was a convinced believer in the strict segregation of musical genres. In an article written in 1933, he strongly criticized composers such as Copland and Weill for incorporating popular music like jazz in their serious music compositions.⁷¹ By the mid-1930s, he had altered his view substantially. His transformation is explained by Carol Oja as originating in his sensitivity to the social realities of the Depression as well as by his marriage to Eva Goldbeck, who was a translator and disciple of Bertolt Brecht.⁷² Another factor in Blitzstein’s change of opinion could have been his engagement in the intense debates carried out by the CC. By 1936, a new appreciation of the creative promise of fusing musical styles led him to reevaluate Weill’s music and to adopt a new musical language in his own work.⁷³ His highly effective musical theater piece, “The Cradle Will Rock” (1936), was a medley of different popular music styles and classical forms such as opera and ballet. Among those

⁷¹Marc Blitzstein, “Popular Music—An Invasion: 1923–1933,” *Modern Music* (1933): 101.

⁷² Carol Oja, “Marc Blitzstein’s ‘The Cradle Will Rock’ and Mass-Song Style of the 1930’s,” 445–75.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 449.

impressed by Blitzstein's newfound approach was Charles Seeger, who claimed that Blitzstein came the closest to embodying the CC's vision of a politically engaged composer.⁷⁴

One of Blitzstein's most influential works, "The Cradle Will Rock" has enjoyed an active performance history over the decades. The original performance of the piece, which was scheduled for July 1937 at the Maxine Elliott Theatre with full orchestra, was shut down at the last minute supposedly because of budget cuts at the Federal Theatre Project. The claim of financial problems seemed to some a cover for political opposition to its out-spoken, pro-communist ideas. Orson Welles, the director of the piece, Houseman, and Blitzstein immediately thought of a "counter-attack". They rented a much larger venue (the Venice Theatre) and decided to go ahead with the production. The word came from the Actor's Equity Association (AEA), an American labor union representing the actors, forbidding the actors to perform on stage. The plan shifted to a solo performance by Blitzstein singing and speaking the parts from the piano. However, Orson Welles, came up with an inspiring plan to evade the union prohibition. He organized it so that the actors spoke their lines from the audience. The piece was performed to a sold-out audience. A year later, on January 3, 1938, the piece received a new production at the Windsor Theatre under the direction of the new Mercury Theatre Company. A rousing success, it went on to a total of 108 performances.

A 1939 Harvard production staged by the student Leonard Bernstein was also a success both in terms of ticket sales and critical notice.⁷⁵ A revival of the "Cradle Will Rock" on Broadway on December 26, 1947, at the Mansfield Theater ran for 34 performances. During the 1950s Red

⁷⁴ Pescatello, *Charles Seeger*, 114.

⁷⁵ Gordon, *Mark the Music*, 178; Oja, "Marc Blitzstein's 'The Cradle Will Rock' and Mass-Song Style of the 1930's," 459-60.

Scare, fellow CC member Earl Robinson “music-directed” the first production in Los Angeles.⁷⁶ In 1969, Leonard Lehrman, a former student of Elie Siegmeister, revived a production again at Harvard, drawing explicit parallels between Blitzstein’s themes and the university’s complicity in the Vietnam War.⁷⁷

After the death of German émigré composer Kurt Weill in 1950, Blitzstein began working on the translation of Brecht’s libretto for Weill’s “Threepenny Opera.” In 1952, the premiere concert performance was directed by Leonard Bernstein with Lotte Lenya in the lead role. A theater performance followed in 1954, for which Lenya won a Tony Award. The piece, which opened at the Theater de Lys on Christopher Street in Greenwich Village on March 10, 1954, successfully ran for 96 performances. The popularity and critical success of this work in the United States is widely credited to Blitzstein’s translation, which helped secure the piece a lasting place in American musical theatre repertoire.

Through his role as transmitter of Weill’s signature score to a new generation of American audiences, Blitzstein may have had a substantial, if indirect, influence on 1960s music. To be sure, direct traces of his influence are few, if any. Blitzstein biographer Eric Gordon claims that Blitzstein’s name and works were no longer of any interest to the 1960s generation of left-wing musical activists.

The new protest music was another stripe entirely – folk and folk-inspired music, such as the songs of Joan Baez and Phil Ochs, or rock in all its varieties, such as the Beatles, Country Joe and the Fish, and the Mothers of Invention. Blitzstein’s sophistication, urbanity, culture, and the times that gave him a singing voice were things of a generation past.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Robinson and Gordon, *Ballad of an American*, 214.

⁷⁷ Gordon, *Mark the Music*, 536. In 1999, Blitzstein’s “Cradle Will Rock” became the subject of a film by Tim Robbins.

⁷⁸ Gordon, *Mark the Music*, 536.

However, several folk and rock musicians of the Sixties have attested to the influence of Weill's music – which was known to them, in many cases, via Blitzstein's translation. Melanie, a singer from the Woodstock generation, claimed that the music of Billie Holiday and Kurt Weill influenced her early singing style. Judy Collins included the famous "Pirate Jenny Song" from the "Threepenny Opera" on her 1966 recording, "In My Life."⁷⁹ Most significantly, Bob Dylan, in his autobiography, relates how striking it was to experience the "raw intensity of (Weill's) songs," their "erratic, unrhythmical and herky-jerky—weird visions." He singles out the "show-stopping ballad, 'A Ship the Black Freighter,' [whose] real title was 'Pirate Jenny,'" as "a new stimulant for [his] senses...like a folk song but a folk song from a different gallon jug in a different backyard." He notes how the song's structure was built on "free verse association...and [a] disregard for the known certainty of melodic patterns." For Dylan, this was music at the "cutting edge," and it motivated him to try and "figure out how to manipulate and control this particular structure and form which [he] knew was the key that gave 'Pirate Jenny' its resilience and outrageous power."

I'd think about this later in my dumpy apartment...I could see that the type of songs I was leaning towards singing didn't exist and I began playing with the form, trying to grasp it—trying to make a song that transcended the information in it, the character and plot.⁸⁰

In all likelihood, the version he heard utilized Blitzstein's English-translated libretto. If Dylan can be taken at his word, one of the most influential political singers and musical innovators of the Sixties found major inspiration and guidance for his own work through serendipitous exposure to a classical music piece originally written in a popular idiom for German audiences by

⁷⁹ Richie Unterberger, *Eight Miles High: Folk-Rock's Flight from Haight-Ashbury to Woodstock* (San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 2003), 82, 112.

⁸⁰ Bob Dylan, *Chronicles: Volume One* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 272–73, 275–76.

Brecht but later for American audiences by Blitzstein. Even if Blitzstein did not influence the 1960s protest music directly, the many-faceted connections between influential 1960s artists and musical activists that grew out of the CC traditions suggest that other of his colleagues in the CC did.

The works of Hanns Eisler, which were important points of reference for CC members, also left a lasting impact on political-musical movements of later generations, including that of the 1960s. In 1949, after his hearing before HUAC, Eisler was forced to leave the United States. This decision sparked protest in progressive circles and led to a large-scale fund-raising party on the composer's behalf in New York City. It was around this time that Woody Guthrie wrote the song, "Eisler on the Go," which preserved the memory of this campaign of solidarity in music. The song's refrain—"I don't know what I'll do, I don't know what I'll do"—expressed the deep sense of frustration felt by Eisler's supporters. The song was never published and went unrecorded for decades. Discovered among the hundreds of lyrics stored over the years in the Woody Guthrie Archives in New York City, it was found by British political folk-punk artist Billy Bragg. Nora Guthrie, Woody Guthrie's daughter, had asked Bragg to comb through the archives for recording material. She was particularly struck by the Eisler song: "I mean for Billy to find Hanns Eisler was miraculous, "Eisler on the Go," which was my favorite personal song on the first one."⁸¹ With the American band, Wilco, Bragg set to music and recorded this song and other unknown lyrics of Woody Guthrie songs, which had never been recorded and for which no musical notation existed. For his part, Eisler ended up in East Germany and worked artistically with Brecht. He never

⁸¹ *Man in The Sand. A Talk with Nora Guthrie*. DVDTalk, <http://www.dvdtalk.com/noraguthrieinterview.html>, accessed Feb. 20, 2021.

returned to the US. The legacy of Eisler stands as a token of the plausibility of the CC's ambition to use the resources of classical music to promote left-wing solidarity and agency.⁸²

Team Seeger: Father and Son

Looking back on his intense involvement with the CC, Charles Seeger commented: "We were all on the wrong track—it was professionals trying to write music for the people and not in the people's idiom. Well, those four things all came together with [the] invitation to go to Washington."⁸³ In the unconditional tone of his remark, Seeger seems to express a view of the CC as a failed experiment. Still, in the following sentence, he implicitly concedes the importance of the ongoing discussions of the CC years, which informed Seeger's later, more nuanced approach to drawing out the political significance of music as an administrator of a New Deal program.

Inspired and provoked by CC's discussions of the value of folk music, Seeger would go on many years after the CC ceased to exist to dedicate himself to the preservation of folk songs.⁸⁴ In November 1935, he found work in the Resettlement Administration (RA) and from 1937–1941 was appointed deputy director of the Federal Music Project (FMP). As a program director in the Special Skills Division of the RA—a division that was meant to help build new communities and overcome disruptions caused by the resettlement of poor families from rural and urban areas to new suburban communities—he relied on the fund of experience he had built up in the CC. According to Sidney Robertson, one of his assistants during the RA years and Cowell's future wife, Seeger's ability to energize others and to stir "up all sorts of other people with ideas for uses

⁸² Another interesting connection between the CC and the folk music revival of the 1960s is Elie Siegmeister's arrangement work for Joan Baez's songbook. See *The Joan Baez Songbook*, ed. Maynard Solomon (Ryerson Music Publishers, 1964).

⁸³ Pescatello, *Charles Seeger*, 135.

⁸⁴ Dunaway, "Charles Seeger and Carl Sands," 168.

to which the archives might be put” helped foster a new attitude toward folk music in the 1930s.⁸⁵ Between 1935 and 1941, approximately 1,000 recordings were added to the collection of American Folk Music in the Library of Congress under his guidance.⁸⁶ As Charles Seeger’s wife and close collaborator, Ruth Crawford Seeger, describes in her collection *American Folk Songs for Children*, the effort to collect and preserve folk art was, to a significant extent, political in both its motivation and effect:

[The folksong collection] gives early experience of democratic attitudes and values.... This kind of music has crossed and recrossed many sorts of boundaries and is still crossing and recrossing them. ⁸⁷

Seeger and Crawford knew that by making folk songs available to a wider audience through publications, they would reach people of different backgrounds and cultures. They hoped that exposure to this diverse musical heritage would foster sympathetic understanding of difference and help to unite people across the lines of class and race.

The most direct line from the intense experiments of the CC to the musical political culture of the Sixties is probably the connection between Charles Seeger and his son Pete Seeger. In 1932, just at the beginning of the formation of the CC, Pete, as a young man, was taken by his father and stepmother Ruth Crawford Seeger to an “unheated loft in Greenwich Village” to hear a speech given by Aaron Copland. It was Pete Seeger’s introduction to the avant-garde atmosphere of CC gatherings:

As Peter watched from the back of the room, two dozen prominent New York composers arrived, dressed in corduroys and leather jackets, carrying scores and

⁸⁵ Pescatello, *Charles Seeger*, 139, 147.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁸⁷ Ruth Crawford Seeger, *American Folk Songs for Children* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1948), 22.

instruments. Trained in the best music schools in the country, they were the renegades of the Philharmonic, passionately political.⁸⁸

Peter was apparently unimpressed. Asked about his father's involvement with the CC years later, Pete Seeger dismissed the ambitions of these musicians and of his father to enlist classical music avant-gardism in the service of left-populist politics: "Well their attempts were laughable."⁸⁹ In one concession, which may have been made with tongue in cheek, Seeger did acknowledge one successful creative episode at the CC:

The closest they all got to writing real songs was when they wrote rounds...My father wanted to publish a book called 'Rounds About the Very Rich.' He was fond of one that was sung in three parts, like 'Row, Row Your Boat.' It went like this... "Oh joy upon this earth/to live and see the day/when Rockefeller senior/shall up to me and say/Comrade, can you spare a dime?"⁹⁰

Needless to say, Pete Seeger did not hold up the CC as a significant influence upon his own development as a politically committed musician. It remains true, however, that his father exposed him to lines of thinking and debate pursued at CC meetings. One event that Pete does acknowledge as having had an immense impact on his musical development was a square dance festival in the Southern Mountains to which his father brought him. "I suddenly realized there was a wealth of music in my country that you never heard on the radio: old-time music, my brother called it—I think a better name than folk music—all over the place."⁹¹ His enthusiasm for the rich but neglected sources of folk music echoes his father's. Charles Seeger was also the one who introduced Pete to Aunt Molly Jackson, who left a lasting impression on Pete: "She sang, 'I am a

⁸⁸ David Dunaway, *How Can I Keep from Singing: Pete Seeger* (New York: Da Capo, 1990), 39.

⁸⁹ "Pete Seeger radio interview with Democracy Now!,"

https://www.democracynow.org/2006/7/3/we_shall_overcome_an_hour_with, accessed Feb. 11, 2021.

⁹⁰ Alec Wilkinson, "The Protest Singer. Pete Seeger and American Folk Music," *New Yorker*, April 17, 2006, p. 44.

⁹¹ Pete Seeger radio interview with "Democracy Now!"

union woman/just as brave as I can be/I do not like the bosses/and the bosses don't like me'... And that was how I began to hear folk music.”⁹²

In the mid-1930s, his father introduced Pete to Alan Lomax, the collector and documenter of American folk music. Through Lomax, Pete came to a deeper understanding of folk music and its distinctive sources in oral culture. “But this was brand-new to me, the idea that you could, you did not have to have a book in front of you, and you could decide which notes and verses you were going to sing.”⁹³ In 1940, twenty-one-year old Pete Seeger started working for Alan Lomax—at the time 25 years old. For 15 dollars a week, Seeger listened through the collected piles of recordings at the archive and made decisions about which songs stood out musically.

One could say that Pete Seeger's burgeoning interest in folk music picked up where his father's preservationist efforts left off. To the extent that Charles Seeger's efforts in the field of folk music had been fostered by the theoretical discussions and aspirations of the CC, Pete's foray into folk music performance with a political edge could be seen as the next step in a logical progression that began with the CC. In his visits to elementary schools and in his efforts to empower audiences at his shows to sing for themselves—“Hey,...I can sing this song myself. I don't need Seeger anymore.”—as Filene puts it - Pete effectively carried forward the democratizing mission that had been so often articulated by CC members.⁹⁴ To take one notable example of Pete's approach from his album “American Favorite Ballads,” he teaches the audience members the different voice parts for “Wimoweh”:

Now this is kind of an experiment. I usually sing this song with a whole bunch of people...[I]t needs basses, altos, and tenors all joining in. It's not a very difficult part. But here I am all by myself, and frankly I can't sing it very well by myself. So

⁹² Wilkinson, “Protest Singer,” 44.

⁹³ “Rik Palieri's Interview with Pete Seeger,” *The Folk Life*, ed. John McLaughlin and Jamie Downs, <http://www.thedigitalfolklife.org/seeger.html>, accessed Feb. 10, 2021.

⁹⁴ Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 197

I'm going to give you the parts...[T]hey sing like this. Now that's too low for some of you, [...] you can take the high part that goes (Seeger demonstrates).⁹⁵

Seeger's dedication to educate and involve his audiences during his performances can be seen as a continuation of one of the core ideas of the CC. An early example of Seeger's educational approach can also be found in his book "How to Play the Five-String Banjo." Besides containing information on the instrument's history and its role in the southern mountain culture, it gives detailed instructions on how to play the instrument properly and most effectively. The book was a project he worked on while touring with Henry Wallace's presidential campaign in 1948. The first edition was self-mimeographed.

Immediately after the war Pete Seeger tried to get involved in the political musical activities of the Communist Party, envisioning the creation of a "singing labor movement" that would involve "hundreds, thousands, ten thousands of union choruses. Just as every church has a choir, why not every union?"⁹⁶ The image of ten-thousand labor choruses interestingly brings to mind the vigorous choral culture that was present in New York City during his father's years at the CC. A meeting in January 1946 with a Communist Party official, in which Seeger laid out his musical ideas of "progressive song books for every union, workers making their own culture and spreading it through People's Song," did not result in any concrete Party plans or initiatives. However, Pete was able to put his musical abilities to Party use at his live performances. During one event, he performed Kentucky banjo tunes to a New York City working class audience. After the concert, a party official came up to him and noted that, "here in New York hardly anybody knows that kind of music... If you are going to work with the workers of New York City, you

⁹⁵ Ibid. .

⁹⁶ Dunaway, *How Can I Keep from Singing*, 117.

should be in the jazz field.”⁹⁷ It was an ironic if unintended echo of the CC’s earlier educational efforts to expand musical tastes by exposing audiences to unfamiliar music idioms. All in all, Charles Seeger’s evolving sense of musical-political mission strongly influenced his son’s choice of musical-political vocation.

One example of an offshoot organization was the *People’s Song Newsletter*, a folk song newsletter founded by Pete Seeger in the postwar period. It preceded and influenced the publication, *Sing Out!* which was eventually to support the work of the 1960s artists in both music and politics.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 118.

Conclusion

If Herbert Haufrecht, former member of the CC, dismisses the ambition of the CC to combine a progressive political content with “highbrow” avant-garde music as “schizophrenic,”⁹⁸ then R. G. Davis offers a different point of view. He argues for the validity of CC’s original goal of an artistic-political marriage that could appeal to working-class audiences.⁹⁹ According to Davis, this initially promising revolutionary artistic impulse was too quickly discarded for a politically problematic, “easy-listening” approach, away from any contact with “dreaded ‘high art.’” He laments that Seeger instead of shifting completely towards folk music could have easily ‘given’ “[the American Left] a more complex vehicle for understanding... Had he chosen to do so, however, it would have been his (and his comrades’) responsibility to make it clear, to explain it to the ‘masses’ so it could be used.” He goes on:

The protest music that has come down from the 1930s to the 1980s via Charles Seeger and his followers is almost always “feel good” music (despite whatever the lyrics might have to say). Musically, it presents no atmosphere of debate because it provides only one side of complex set of questions. Composed, intellectual music also allows for debate with form; folk has room for only one theme (“Unite!” or “Strike!” or “Victory!”) and little for oppositional dialogue. Pleasing, nostalgic, and above all, entertaining, it is useful at rallies and on picket lines.

This line of argument is interesting. Despite his contempt for “feel good” folk music, Davis does implicitly allow that, in urgent or pressing situations, a “simple” and upbeat music may be necessary to encourage unity or promote action (“Strike!”). One only has to bring to mind the emotionally explosive atmosphere of the Civil Rights struggle, where music became an important means of encouragement for participants to stick together and not flinch in the prospect of mental and physical abuse. By indirectly describing folk as a genre of “feel good” and “easy-listening”

⁹⁸ Dunaway “Unsung Songs of Protest,” 7.

⁹⁹ R. G. Davis, “Music from the Left,” *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society* 1 (Winter 1988): 7–25, doi: 10.1080/08935698808657825.

music, Davis ignores many of the complex aspects of folk music that have been pointed out by classical avant-garde composers such as Ruth Crawford Seeger.¹⁰⁰ Charles Seeger, for example, noted that folk music exhibited a unique potential for weaving together music and text: "...the stuff put together with the music and the words were absolutely marvelous...."¹⁰¹ One could argue that this unique interweaving of music and words revealed a complexity of form which stimulated the sort of reflection and debate for which Davis seems to call. (As an analogy, one need only think of rap's kinetic fusion of words and music and the sort of intellectual and political challenges this fusion raises for listeners.) It is noteworthy, however, that at the end of the day, Davis does not advocate "a dismissal of the folk/jazz/pop tradition, only an expansion of the musical palette that is comparable to a postmodern, historically materialist discourse."

Davis's position although controversial is thought-provoking and worth investigating further. The CC's original mission of bringing across their political avant-garde music to the 'masses' is certainly a valid one. Earlier experiments with similar goals, like the settlement house of the late 1800s and early 1900s, show that it was possible to build this kind of "advanced" musical-political membership. To successfully follow through with such a mission, however, it was necessary to establish an infrastructure, which continuously worked to involve and create musical communities by the means of education and concerts. Settlement houses, such as Hull House in Chicago and Henry Street in New York City, both used contemporary classical music education as an important tool to inspire social and political change.

The CC was more focused on discussions within the collective than on outreach. Members' turn towards folk music, more 'pleasant' and easily communicated musical aesthetics, and their

¹⁰⁰ Tick, *Ruth Crawford Seeger*, 242.

¹⁰¹ Pescatello, *Charles Seeger*, 135.

decision to abandon the CC was stimulated, as noted earlier, by many different factors. In hindsight, it might seem that the members of the CC were too impatient and gave up too easily. From a historical distance, however this judgment is a difficult judgment to make. Shaped and influenced by the “Zeitgeist” of the Depression era the members were swept up in the push by the American Communist Party for a Popular Front, in which a search for uniquely Americanism artistic expressions began. Also, as creative artists, members wanted to advance and develop their own music, and found the group-oriented constellation of the CC too constricting. But even if they did not fulfill their original goal, ex-members and associates of the CC can be seen as having been engaged in activities consistent with the CC’s central mission: educating a broader public musically and fostering political awareness at the same time.

However plausible Davis’s position, it is important to point out that works like “Ballad for Americans” and “Cradle Will Rock,” so obviously shaped by the CC’s discussions, cannot be dismissed as “easy-listening” or “feel good music.” Both works offer a unique fusion of popular, folk (lowbrow) and classical avant-garde musical idioms (highbrow). The new pathways presented by works like these opened doors for future generations of composers. One of them was Leonard Bernstein, whom Blitzstein first got to know at the 1939 Harvard production of *The Cradle Will Rock*, and who felt deeply inspired by the older composer. More than once—to the annoyance of Blitzstein—his admiration went as far as borrowing musical tunes, without attribution, and even whole songs from Blitzstein for his own works.¹⁰² Bernstein’s work, *West Side Story*, extends the musical pathway first laid out by Blitzstein’s political musical theater. According to Gordon, Bernstein also “transparently” transformed a musical theme from Blitzstein’s “Regina” and used

¹⁰² Gordon, *Mark the Music*, 364.

it for one of *West Side Story*'s signature songs, "Maria."¹⁰³ Oja argues that the impact of Blitzstein's work on the music world can be seen in the musical theatre and Broadway pieces of the Fifties and Sixties, including the compositions of Sondheim and Bernstein.¹⁰⁴

In a somewhat parallel line of argument, Eric A. Gordon, Blitzstein's biographer sees the genre of musical theatre and operatic stage as the one in which American composers have had the strongest impact as politically informed creative artists.¹⁰⁵ According to him, popular music on Broadway, benefited from the difficulty American composers had in finding opera houses which financially would take a chance on new American pieces. This difficulty left the composers with little choice but to compose more and more for the popular stage. Although Gordon does not specifically mention the CC in his argument, he does mention several composers affiliated with the group who "carved out" places on the popular stage, among them: Blitzstein, Copland and Robinson. Continuing on to the present, Gordon names Leonard Bernstein, Richard Rodgers, Stephen Sondheim, Philip Glass, and John Adams.¹⁰⁶

Despite regretting Charles Seeger's turn toward folk and "'feel good' music," Davis nevertheless acknowledges the importance of Charles Seeger "and his followers" in launching a tradition of American protest music. In the light of the enormous impact of the works of many

¹⁰³ Ibid., 431.

¹⁰⁴ Oja, "Marc Blitzstein's 'The Cradle Will Rock' and Mass-Song Style of the 1930's," 459.

¹⁰⁵ Eric A. Gordon, "Political Consciousness and the American Composer," *International Center for American Music*, p. 3,

http://icamus.org/media/filer_public/17/a9/17a949ca-8f0e-4982-8809-4931d3c58c89/eric_a_gordon_-_icamus_seminar_-_october_2006.pdf, accessed Feb. 11, 2021.

¹⁰⁶ "Menotti cannot be considered America's most socially conscious composer, however. That landscape was carved out by others, such as Marc Blitzstein, a Marxist humanist who made it his lifelong project to illuminate American problems of class, gender and race, and intermittently by Jerome Kern, George Gershwin, Kurt Weill, Aaron Copland, Leonard Bernstein, Richard Rogers, Frederick Loewe, Carlisle Floyd, Stephen Sondheim, William Finn, Philip Glass, John Adams, and others. [...] Earl Robinson, composer of "Ballad for Americans," "Joe Hill," and "The House I Live In," wrote a full-length stage work, "Sandhog" (1954), whose principal characters are the Irish-American workers who built the subway tunnels under New York harbor." See Gordon, "Political Consciousness and the American Composer."

former members or associates of the CC in shaping a tradition of American political protest music, the CC clearly deserves recognition as a unique institution in American cultural life. Even if its ambitious goal to foster a progressive-revolutionary political consciousness in working class audiences by exposing them to the aesthetically revolutionary idioms of avant-garde music was not achieved during its existence, the CC's members' eventual decision to trespass across musical genre borders was itself a radical "move," that helped open doors for future experiments in political-engaged music making. In this regard, Dunaway's point that, "the era of the Composers Collective may be seen by future historians as an American musical genesis," 107 seems well taken.

What was new in the CC's approach was the coordination of a group of prominent American composers all pushing toward the same goal. This push arose out of the continuing theoretical discussions held at the CC which provided a theoretical base for later efforts. Besides fostering broad discussions about political music, the CC also created an important network of personal contacts and collaborations. As Composers' Collective member Henry Leland Clarke saw it, the theoretical discussions as well as the contacts and collaborations prepared the ground for later significant developments:

The Composers' Collective of 1935 was a rare institution...rarely have creative artists worked for a common cause with sufficient dedication to make them WANT criticism from each other. Without the CC there would have been no *Abe Lincoln Song* by Earl Robinson, and without his *Lincoln Song* there would have been no *Lincoln Portrait* by Aaron Copland. Without the Composers' Collective there would have been no *Cradle Will Rock* by Marc Blitzstein, and without his *Cradle Will Rock* there would have been no *West Side Story* by Leonard Bernstein.108

107 Dunaway, "Unsung Songs of Protest," 9.

108 Henry Leland Clarke cited in Pescatello, *Charles Seeger*, 117. For Clark's response to Steven E. Gilbert, see "In Seventy-Six the Sky Was Red': A Profile of Earl Robinson," presented to the annual meeting of the American Musicological Society, Nov. 7, 1976.

The shared aims and mutual influences of these composers, musicians, and intellectuals of the 1930s and their systematic efforts to use music as a medium of social struggle, provided a template from which folk singers of the Civil Rights and anti-war movements of the Sixties could operate. The still powerful echo of the protest music of the 1960s and their performers is strongly linked to CC efforts to popularize folk songs as a political vehicle and the classical techniques they made available. Through its intensive working over of musical material, its generation of networks, its focus on education (exemplified in Ruth Crawford Seeger's publications of folk song for children and Pete Seeger's insistence on audience participation), the CC created resources for future generations of musical protestors. One could even argue that these efforts were crucial to the birth of a specific American protest music which has been deeply shaped by a fusion of different musical traditions.

BEHIND THE CURTAIN: POPULAR CULTURE ROOTS OF THE ALTERNATIVE RIGHT IN THE EURO-AMERICAN REALM

BJ BRUTHER

Have people in the United States and Europe of the twenty-first century fallen into the same trap as the generation of World War I, which fell under the glamour of dangerous political myths? Yes, they have fallen into the trap, for behind the curtain of QAnon and other conspiracist sites online and in print are elaborate myths generated from humanity's darkest histories which have been made popular again. One of the darkest political myths has been the "blood libel," which is the belief that the Jewish community sacrifices a Christian child in imitation of the passion of the Christ. This political myth is linked to ideas about white supremacy and racial hierarchies popularized in British imperial adventure literature. This imperial adventure literature provides the base for today's popular culture from which the alternative Right draws its agenda, revealing its anachronistic, ahistorical, and nostalgic vision of the modern world.

Ernst Cassirer sounded the alarm at the end of the World War II. He maintained that "the most alarming feature in this development of modern political thought is the appearance of new power: the power of mythical thought."¹ He lamented, "When we first heard of the political myths we found them so absurd and incongruous, so fantastic and ludicrous that we could hardly be prevailed to take them seriously. By now it has become clear to all of us that this was a great mistake. We should not commit the same error a second time."² Dismissing the power of such political myths is dangerous—these myths are "impervious to rational arguments" or not easily "refuted by syllogisms." They are "invulnerable."³ They can become deeply embedded in one's imagination through the medium of popular culture: stories, music, and films.

¹ Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946, reprint 1974), 3.

² *Ibid.*, 296.

³ *Ibid.*

Compelling, simplistic, emotionally (and musically) driven narratives have real staying power in the imagination.⁴ Humans then “mold the facts to fit our preexisting opinions, and not the other way around . . . we fall prey to confirmation bias and cling to those facts most consistent with our beliefs and intentionally ignore those that disconfirm them.”⁵

The “blood libel” first appeared in twelfth century England in and around the city of Norwich following the death of a Christian child, William, under mysterious circumstances. Nearly thirty years after the incident, a cleric, Thomas of Monmouth, popularized William’s death as one of martyrdom, hoping to bring pilgrims and money into the local economy. He blamed local Jewish individuals for the boy’s death. According to him, those individuals had kidnapped William for ritual purposes and butchered him in the same manner as Christ.⁶ Although the story left a light footprint in the historical record, more accusations followed, some leading to trials and executions, leaving behind official records.⁷ New elements were added to the “blood libel” narrative: a shadowy council of rabbis who decreed that a particular European Jewish community carry out the annual ritual sacrifice around Passover and the drinking or consumption of the child’s blood.⁸ Medieval and early modern popes and secular rulers often discounted these ritual murder narratives; yet, they did not condemn them publicly in official documents. When a toddler named Simon vanished in the city of Trent, the myth gained new power in 1475. Once the boy’s body had been found in a canal running under a Jewish home on Easter Day, the local bishop, Johannes Hinderbach maintained that the local Jewish community had selected Simon for ritual sacrifice on the first night of Passover. According to Magda Teter, “what is known comes primarily from sources created or preserved by Bishop Johannes Hinderbach . . . and his allies [which] shaped the public memory of Simon’s death and the trial that ensued;

⁴ William J. Bernstein, *The Delusion of Crowds: Why People Go Mad in Groups* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2021), 28–37.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 385.

⁶ Magda Teter, *Blood Libel: On the Trail of an Antisemitic Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020), 23.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 28–29

⁸ Norman Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish World Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (London: Serif, 1967, reprint 1996), 25–26; Gavin I. Langmuir, *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), 277–81.

they also shaped the historical records on which later scholars have relied.”⁹ Hinderbach and his allies were what today might be called spin doctors. They carried out a “sophisticated, and not inexpensive, public campaign” [which] “was quite successful.”¹⁰ Local Jewish individuals were arrested, judicially tortured, tried, and executed for the child’s death.

From the point of view of the Catholic Church, the Tridentine trial of those individuals for young Simon’s murder had been entirely valid and legal. After all, for centuries, the Church had condemned Jewish people as the killers of Christ, at Easter and in masses. Even Pope Benedict XIV repeated the phrase “cruelly killed by Jews in hatred of the Christian faith” in his letter about the death of a child, *Beatus Andreas*, in the mid-eighteenth century. The letter simply “validated the charge and thus the historicity of similar stories passed on in European chronicles.” Hence, it “became a new authoritative source for the proponents of anti-Jewish accusations. To be sure, the pope never affirmed the “blood libel” accusation—according to Benedict the murders were *in odio*—but that distinction would be lost on future accusers.”¹¹ Protestant churches often adhered to the same discourse. And so through the medium of multiple printings--chapbooks, ballads, broadsheets, and illustrations--the stories of ritual murders of Christian children at the hands of Jewish people were popularized and spread widely throughout Europe and Russia.

Jewish people had been demonized for centuries, called the sons of Satan, and carefully separated from Christian society through isolation in specified locations, through regulated occupations, and through particular clothing and badges. Stereotypes were reinforced in printed popular literature and stage plays, as seen in the characterization of Shylock in Shakespeare’s play, *The Merchant of Venice*, which further developed the stereotype of the avaricious, letter of the law Jewish money lender.¹²

In the nineteenth century, a wave of emancipations swept through the European and American world—Catholic emancipation in Ireland, Jewish emancipation in Europe, and enslaved peoples freed

⁹ Teter, *Blood Libel*, 44.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 314.

¹² William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*. Act I, Scene 3, Line 1–174.

worldwide. Jewish people had become an indistinguishable segment of a liberal and urban society. It seemed that many Jewish people had become the champions of new political ideas, born of the new urban industrialized society, anarchism, socialism, and communism, which threatened the ordained order of the world.¹³ Concurrently, Robert Knox and Count Arthur de Gobineau popularized the idea that humankind was divided into “distinct and permanent races” through their books, *The Races of Men* (1850) and *Essay on the Inequality of Human Races* (1854). The focus of this new racial science was on such markers as “skin colour, facial features, texture of hair, and with the growing influence of phrenology, size and shape of the skull, . . . each race was innately associated with distinct social, cultural and moral traits. . . . races could be graded in a coherent hierarchy of talent and beauty, with whites on the top and blacks at the bottom.”¹⁴ This new racial science maintained that Jewish people were biologically different—a separate and inferior people. What had started as a religious hatred directed at Jewish people who were blamed for the death of Jesus Christ (and their failure to recognize the Christian messiah) became an economic blame game in the early modern period that would harden into a biologically based racialism by the end of the nineteenth century.

An outbreak of virulent anti-Semitism in both Republican France and Imperial Russia led an Austrian writer, Theodor Herzl, to seek an answer to this terrible hatred in the late nineteenth century. He turned to nationalism--the idea that the Jewish people needed a nation of their own—a new Zion. Ethnically based nations had become normative in Europe, as both Germany and Italy became nations, and other ethnicities sought independence in Ireland and Eastern Europe, fighting against their British and Russian overlords. The blood libel itself never went away. At the beginning of the twentieth century, a text called the *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*, building on the old stereotypes, maintained that

. . . there exists a secret Jewish government which through a world-wide network of camouflaged agencies and organizations, controls political parties and governments, the

¹³ Paul Hanebrink, *A Specter Haunting Europe: The Myth of Judeo-Bolshevism* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018), 28–31.

¹⁴ Ali Rattansi, *Racism: A Very Short Introduction*. Second Edition. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 17.

press, and public opinion, banks and economic developments. The secret government is supposed to be doing this in pursuance of an age-old plan and with single aim of achieving Jewish domination over the entire world; and it is supposed to be perilously near to achieving this aim.¹⁵

This particular myth and the previous linkage of Jewish people to socialism/communism played a role in the Holocaust, 1939–1945.¹⁶ After the Holocaust, at least in Europe and the United States, this political myth and the *Protocols* faded into the backwaters of the extreme Right. The extreme Right relabeled the “secret Jewish government” imagined in the *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*, the Zionist Occupation Government (ZOG), and tightly associated it with the state of Israel which was considered to have a secret influence on governments in Europe and the United States. American Protestant evangelicals, in particular, had problems with the idea of ZOG. For them, the creation of Israel was a harbinger of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ in their vision of history. Jewish people were not a problem, for the Second Coming would lead to their mass conversion. Feminism, gay rights, multiculturalism, abortion, and teaching about such ideas in public school were the real threats.¹⁷

Although “we like to assume that the arc of history will bend inexorably toward justice,” this may be “wishful thinking,” for “unmediated social media” has modified language, and our understanding of “who we are.”¹⁸ QAnon, the spokes site for the anonymous poster, Q, has become the most popular purveyor of these restructured and repurposed anti-Semitic myths, which in their new form have been popularized on Fox News and by Trump (and his administration). According to the followers of the anonymous Q, “the criminals are also known as the Deep State, or cabal, because of how they control things behind the scenes.”¹⁹ The criminals are represented in the United States by William Jefferson Clinton, Hillary Rodham Clinton, George H. W. Bush, George W. Bush, and most especially Barack Hussein Obama. For Q and his

¹⁵ Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide*, 27.

¹⁶ Thomas Milan Konda, *Conspiracies of Conspiracies: How Delusions Have Overrun America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 50–53, 91.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 171–75.

¹⁸ Andrew Marantz, *Anti-Social: Online Extremists, Techno-Utopians, and the Hijacking of the American Conversation* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2019), 4, 7.

¹⁹ WWG1WGA. *QANON: An Invitation to the Great Awakening* (Dallas, TX: Relentlessly Creative Books, 2019), 6.

followers, the only heroic American figures fighting the criminal elite were Ronald Reagan and Donald Trump.

You must learn. . . that it was the CRIMINALS all along . . . They rose to the top of media companies that control our news and entertainment. They ascended to the top of the banking system . . . They became leaders of agricultural companies who have control over the food supply. Also big pharmaceutical companies . . . First they accumulated the world's wealth. They invented a system of money called Central Banking which lends money to governments with interest, placing countries into eternal debt . . . So they used their control of media to set black against white, woman against man, young against old, Muslim against Christian . . . To get it done faster, they attacked all aspects of humanity that make us strong. Like family. Using their influence over culture, they popularized lifestyle choices that led to a surge in broken homes, lost youth and substance abuse.”²⁰

To the followers of Q the Deep State has links to the Illuminati, the Bilderberg Group, George Soros, the House of Saud, the Rothschild family, and a cabal of Satan-worshipping globalists and pedophiles, often called the New World Order.²¹ According to Q's followers, George Soros, a particular target, and his Open Society Foundation, supports the New World Order agenda, directing his donations “toward Progressive Communist Leftist causes and ultra-liberal programs” which support “open borders, unlimited illegal immigration” [and sponsors] Black Lives Matter.”²² The Deep State has supported “[t]he purest of pure evil—beyond theft, corruption, murder, and blackmail—. . . the kidnapping, torture, raping, and sacrifice of children. The perpetrators are Luciferian and Satan-worshippers. They run pedophile networks across continents through the Vatican, and underneath the cover of charities and child protective services.”²³ Q and his followers maintain that the elites are worshippers of Satan, who raise their consciousness and stay youthful through drinking the blood of ritually sacrificed children obtaining a natural chemical called adrenochrome, a repurposed version of the “blood libel.”²⁴

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 4–5.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 6-9, 65, 79, 88, 102; Konda, *Conspiracies of Conspiracies*, 143–49, 155–60.

²² WWG1WGA, *QAnon*, 154–55.

²³ *Ibid.*, 36, Konda, *Conspiracies of Conspiracies*, 298–301.

²⁴ WWG1WGA, *QAnon*, 259.

Q and his followers consistently link multiculturalism, women’s rights, and homosexual civil rights to the destruction of small-town and rural life in the United States. They present themselves as champions of traditional values, stating “[w]ithout a nuclear family, held together by a genetic male husband and genetic female wife, we are doomed. The global elites’ goal is an end to monogamy, God-given gender, and normal procreation.”²⁵ They see any critique of American history or the “Western Canon” as “Common Core/Scrubbed History Indoctrination.”²⁶ Prior to and during the current pandemic, they have advocated for “no elite forced vaccination.”²⁷ They see Hollywood and Washington, D.C., working hand in hand to spread the New World Order agenda worldwide, linking popular films to messages supporting women’s rights, African American and homosexual civil rights, and even the notion of child sacrifice.²⁸ Q and his followers hope for a “Great Awakening” and “The Storm,” language choices that link Q to white supremacists in the United States, advocates of the far Right worldwide, and historically to Adolf Hitler and the National Socialist German Workers Party.

A strong link has been forged between Q supporters, evangelical Protestants, and white supremacists based upon fear—all of whom fear loss of their privileged position in society. They see themselves as a pure people threatened on all sides. They see ruin ahead, leading inexorably to white genocide and the dominance of the “mud people” (people of color).²⁹ The core idea of the white supremacist movement is a simple statement, known as the fourteen words, “[w]e must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children.”³⁰ They find comfort in this statement. They will not be replaced, as long as they take action to reinforce traditional gender roles, enforce the racial hierarchy, and turn their backs on a truly democratic society—one where all people get to participate. They are asked to join a newly awakened brotherhood of those who see the truth, those who have taken the red pill. He (and it is most

²⁵ Ibid., 47.

²⁶ Ibid., 248.

²⁷ Ibid. Konda, *Conspiracies of Conspiracies*, 305–8.

²⁸ WWG1WGA, *QAnon*, 244. The films *The Dark Crystal*, *Monsters, Inc.*, and *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* are seen as popularizing the idea of ritual child sacrifice.

²⁹ Konda, *Conspiracies of Conspiracies*, 235–36; Mike Wendling, *Alt-Right: From 4chan to the White House* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), 144

³⁰ Wendling, *Alt-Right*, 76.

likely a disaffected white male) becomes a soldier in the Storm, the coming struggle to save white people from replacement and genocide. He thinks of himself as a hero, a new Neo³¹, which is ironic since Neo, in the 1999 film *The Matrix*, from which the red pill moment is taken, is the hated cultural Marxist, a social justice warrior.³² What is truly striking about this scenario is the utter poverty of the alt Right's collective imaginations. Their agenda is simply recycled narratives based upon late Victorian (imperial) British adventure tales, American pulp fiction, and recent Hollywood blockbusters.

Today, commentators express surprise at the ease with which Americans (and Europeans) embrace the latest conspiracy. Yet, it is no surprise; popular culture reinforces such beliefs, far beyond *The Matrix* and its red pill. Secret societies are at the center of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), either composed of earth-born or alien elites hiding themselves from the world but influencing it for good or ill. They appear in virtually every film, beginning with *Iron Man* (2008) and continuing in the film, *Eternals* (2021). One of the central characters, Tony Stark (Iron Man) is a classic superhero, a privileged white male, a man of wealth, who takes on a secret identity, as a result of adversity, gains a conscience, and joins a U.S. government-sponsored secret society, the Avengers, bent on protecting the world from domestic foes, in particular that survivor of the Third Reich, Hydra, and extra-terrestrial foes, such as Thanos, the Mad Titan.³³ The MCU is based upon comic books and graphic novels, which in turn were based upon American pulp fiction, which in turn were based upon late Victorian (imperial) adventure stories. It all started as Europeans and later Americans established empires located in Africa and Asia in the late nineteenth century. As cartographers filled in the blank spaces of the world, late Victorian writers of adventure stories

³¹ Rory McVeigh and Kevin Estep. *The Politics of Losing: Trump, the Klan, and the Mainstreaming of Resentment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 49–50, 79–80, 146; David Neiwert. *Alt-America: The Rise of the Radical Right in the Age of Trump* (New York: Verso, 2017), 42–43; Alexandra Minna Stern. *Proud Boys and the White Ethnostate: How the Alt-Right is Warping the American Imagination* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2019), 16–17; Ugur Umil Ungor, *Paramilitarism: Mass Violence in the Shadow of the State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 149.

³² Cultural Marxism is an umbrella term for women's and homosexual rights, "birth control, socialism, atheism, relativism, environmentalism, immigration, multiculturalism." See Wendling, *Alt-Right*, 81.

³³ *Iron Man*, prod. and dir. Kevin Feige, Avi Arad, and Jon Favreau (Paramount Pictures, 2008).

embraced the fast-disappearing blank spots on the map, imagining hidden lost civilizations and ever-expanding frontiers, on earth and in space.

Late Victorian adventure story writers, such as Henry Rider Haggard, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Bram (Abraham) Stoker, have anchored their stories in the racial science of their time, popularizing those ideas in their stories, which highlight white male privilege and Western dominance. A surprising character bolstered their ideas, paradoxically, as she was a purveyor of Eastern spiritualism and known anti-imperialist, Madame Helena Blavatsky, Russian émigré and founder of theosophy, through her comprehensive occult history of the world, *The Secret Doctrine*.³⁴ Blavatsky created her own racial hierarchy in her history—she emphasized the idea of the Root Race, the first and second, possibly the Hyperboreans, were unknowable, without bodies, pure energy; the third Root Race was corporeal, and of the sunken continent Lemuria, the Fourth Root Race was from Atlantis, and the Fifth Root Race was Aryan (and incorporated the Semite and Turanian). She projected that there would be two additional Root Races, one born of America, and the other born from the Sixth in some far distant future. Blavatsky linked the Aryan and the swastika in her text.³⁵ Her popularization of Ignatius Donnelly’s Lemuria, Plato’s Atlantis, and her own creation of the Hyperboreans would influence later American pulp fiction and comic books. Her attitude toward the racial hierarchy was contradictory, “[m]ankind is obviously divided into god-informed men and lower human creatures. The intellectual difference between the Aryan and other civilized nations and such savages as the South Sea Islanders is inexplicable on any other grounds.” She was convinced that a sacred spark, an essence, was missing from those islanders, the “Bushmen of the Kalahari, the Veddhas of Ceylon, and some African tribes.”³⁶ Yet just a few pages later, she could say “[A]nd it is the descendants of those of our highly cultured nations, who might have survived on some island without any means of crossing the new seas, that would fall back into a state of relative savagery. Thus, the reason

³⁴ David Allen Harvey, “Elite Magic in the Nineteenth Century” in *The Cambridge History of Magic and Witchcraft in the West: From Antiquity to the Present*, ed. David J. Collins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 556–57.

³⁵ H(elen) P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy Anthropogenesis*. (2 vols., London: The Theosophical Publishing Company, Limited, 1888), II, 101.

³⁶ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine*, II, 421.

given for dividing humanity into *superior* and *inferior* races falls to the ground and becomes a fallacy.”³⁷ She also linked her history of mankind to the late Victorian (imperial) adventure story directly, lauding the novels *She* (1887) and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1887), seeing the stories as dreams of reality.³⁸

Late Victorian scientists, especially those studying criminality, such as Cesare Lombroso, focused on the concept of atavism, the idea of savage primitive man reappearing among modern men, and using it to explain the behavior of violent criminal offenders.³⁹ Stevenson uses this idea as the base of his novel, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Henry Jekyll is a wealthy physician, charitable and kind, who develops a potion which allows his atavistic self to manifest in a “pale, dwarfish” man with a “displeasing smile” and a “murderous mixture of timidity and boldness”⁴⁰, known as Edward Hyde. Everyone who encounters Hyde has the same reaction: “[H]e is not easy to describe. There is something wrong with his appearance; something displeasing, something downright detestable . . . He must be deformed somewhere,”⁴¹ When the narrator encounters Hyde, he feels not only an immediate hatred, but also a strong nausea. Hyde manifests his primitive urges in violent actions, trampling a small child and later beating an elderly man, Sir Danvers Carew, to death in front of witnesses. Jekyll buys off the parents of the small child, as she was from a poor family, to prevent Hyde’s arrest, and later he commits suicide to avoid responsibility and loss of reputation for Carew’s death.⁴²

Even the creator of Sherlock Holmes, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, reinforces this idea of atavism in his novel, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. He describes the Notting Hill killer, Selden, as individual of “peculiar ferocity” and “wanton brutality”, whose first appearance shocks the reader, “an evil yellow face, a terrible animal face, all seamed and scored with vile passions. Foul with mire, with a bristling beard, and

³⁷ Ibid., 425.

³⁸ Ibid., 317.

³⁹ Cesare Lombroso, trans. Mary Gibson and Nicole Hahn Rafter, *Criminal Man* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 39, 91.

⁴⁰ Robert Louis Stevenson. *Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886; Bantam Books, 1981), 15.

⁴¹ Ibid., 7.

⁴² Ibid., 24, 53–54, 69–75.

hung with matted hair, it might well have belonged to one of those old savages who dwelt in the burrows on the hillsides . . . small cunning eyes . . . a crafty savage animal” Doyle makes the link with primitive man obvious, calling Selden, a “short, squat, strongly built figure.” Sherlock Holmes labels the main villain of the tale, Stapleton, as a physical and spiritual throwback to the originator of the curse, Sir Hugo Baskerville, a “wild, profane and godless man.”⁴³

White male privilege and supremacy were the cornerstones of one of the great adventure novels of the late Victorian era, *She*, published in 1887. The novel opens dramatically, Ludwig Horace Holly, an intellectual and future Cambridge mathematics professor, is approached by a dying former student to be the guardian of his five-year-old son, Leo Vincey, and a mysterious locked iron box. During a lengthy conversation, Holly agrees to take the iron box and hold it in trust for the boy until young Leo reaches his twenty-fifth year. The dying man also outlines a rigorous program of study for his son, one of which includes higher mathematic, plus the Greek and Arabic languages. He settles a lifetime income on Holly for taking on this guardianship. Holly has many misgivings, being today what is called an involuntary celibate (incel). He describes himself as an atavistic individual more akin to primitive man in appearance,

short, thick-set, and deep-chested almost to deformity, with long, sinewy arms, heavy features, hollow grey eyes, a low brow half overgrown with a mop of thick black hair . . . Like Cain, I was branded—branded by Nature with the stamp of abnormal ugliness, as I was gifted by Nature with iron and abnormal strength and considerable intellectual powers . . . Women hated the sight of me . . . Once indeed, a woman pretended to care for me, and I lavished all the pent-up affection of my nature upon her. Then money that was to have come to me went elsewhere, and she discarded me.⁴⁴

When the boy arrives at his lodgings, Holly determines to follow his instructions to the letter. He will have no interference, “I would have no woman to lord it over me about the child, and steal his affections from me. The boy was old enough to do without female assistance, so I set to work to find a suitable male

⁴³ Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Hound of the Baskervilles,” in *The Complete Sherlock Holmes* (2 vols., Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1960), II 715, 750.

⁴⁴ H(enry) Rider Haggard, *She* (London: Dover Publications, 1887), 8.

attendant.”⁴⁵ The boy Leo grew into a beautiful young man, “his eyes were grey, his forehead broad, and his face, even at that early age, clean cut as a cameo . . . his hair, which was pure gold in colour and tightly curled over his shapely head.”⁴⁶ At age twenty-five, Leo, a young Apollo in appearance, and Holly, nicknamed Charon, retrieved the iron box, opened it, studied the contents, several short manuscripts, pot fragments, and a scarab, and embarked on a quest. It takes them to an unknown kingdom located in East Africa.

There, they meet the dictatorial ruler of a forgotten African kingdom, protected by a vast swamp and mountains, She-who-must-be-obeyed. As Holly enters her presence, he witnesses the power that she has over the local tribesmen, who immediately drop to the ground and crawl on their bellies to her feet. Holly thinks, “I am an Englishman and why, I asked myself, should I creep into the presence of some savage woman as though I were a monkey in fact as well as in name?”⁴⁷ He walks upright into her presence, and is stunned to discover, that unlike the tribal community, a “yellowish” people with “cold and sullen cruelty stamped upon” their faces “that revolted”⁴⁸ him, She-who-must-be-obeyed is a beautiful white woman. To Holly, steeped in classical history, She is a Circe, a powerful being, of great “beauty and purity,” but “evil.”⁴⁹ He discovers that this woman has isolated herself in this forgotten kingdom for two thousand years, awaiting the return of her lover, Kallikrates, who has been reborn in the form of his lineal descendant, Leo Vincey. She has had no impact on the world, preferring a passive life in a forgotten kingdom, indulging herself in cruel and capricious behavior directed at her subjects. Once she sees young Leo, however, she pledges her “utter and absolute devotion” to the young man, offering him eternal life at her side, as her husband and she, a subservient wife.⁵⁰ She pledges, “[b]ehold in token of submission do I bow me to my lord!” She “will cherish Good and abandon Evil, “eschew Ambition”, and “set Wisdom over me as a ruling

⁴⁵ Ibid., 16.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 106.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 60.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 118.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 182.

star to led me unto Truth and a knowledge of the Right.”⁵¹ Having seen young Leo fall under her spell and her unrestrained and emotional behavior, Holly fears for the world. He “had little doubt she would assume rule over the British dominions, and probably over the whole earth . . . at the cost of a terrible sacrifice of life.”⁵² At the end of the tale, white male privilege and supremacy is restored, She-who-must-be-obeyed is destroyed in the rolling Pillar of Fire that gives eternal life.

Embedded in *She* was another fear of the late Victorian age: the fear of the immigrant, who brought a degenerate racial component into the white world, a fear more directly expressed in Bram Stoker’s novel, *Dracula*. Like She-who-must-be-obeyed, Dracula lives in a forgotten region of the world, the Carpathian Mountains (present day Romania). For centuries he has been content to live in his ancestral holdings, draining the local peasants of their blood, but longs for new fresh blood. He determines to leave his mountains for England. Once in England, he brings his thirst for blood into a new population, bringing about deadly contagion, a pandemic from the East into London and its environs. He infects two individuals, a young aristocrat, Lucy Westenra, and a delusional man, Renfield, with his blood lust. Both are degenerate representations of his blood lust; Lucy preys on children and Renfield, on insects and small animals.⁵³ His infection is countered through the efforts of stalwart white Anglo-Saxon males who destroy the dangerous immigrant in their midst, chasing him back to his ancestral home, destroying him.

An English writer bridged the gap between late Victorian (imperial) adventure stories and American pulp fiction—Sax Rohmer (Arthur Henry Sarsfield Ward). Although he is best known for his creation of the master criminal from East Asia, Fu Manchu, his novel, *Brood of the Witch Queen*, reasserts many of the late Victorian (imperial) adventure story themes of white supremacy, male privilege, racial degeneration, and fear of the immigrant. The hero of the tale is Robert Cairn, “a tall, thin Scotsman, clean-shaven, square jawed, and with the crisp light hair and gray eyes which often bespeak unusual virility”⁵⁴;

⁵¹ Ibid., 213.

⁵² Ibid., 193.

⁵³ Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (1965; New York: Penguin Group/Signet Classic, 1992), 149, 183–84.

⁵⁴ Sax Rohmer, *Brood of the Witch Queen* (1918; New York: Doubleday & Company, 1966), 9.

the villain, Anthony Ferrara, a “statuesque ivory face . . . over-red lips . . . long glittering dark eyes . . . beneath the straightly penciled brows, . . . Save for the short, lustreless hair it was the face of a handsome evil woman.”⁵⁵ Anthony may be a Scotsman of Spanish descent and a student at Oxford, but he lives in in super-heated rooms scented with heavy incense, surrounded by statues of Egyptian deities, ancient preserved mummies, and antique scrolls and manuscripts.⁵⁶ Ferrara preys upon members of London society, Lord Lashmore, the descendant of a Polish Jewess and vampire, and his wife, a South American beauty and medium who are already contaminated genetically, opening them to Ferrara’s baleful influence. Cairn believes that Ferrara practices murderous black magic, for Anthony’s father and Lord Lashmore have both died unexpectedly. Cairn had witnessed the violent death of a white swan, following an arcane ceremony in Ferrara’s dwelling. Ferrara flees to Egypt, where locals claim an out-of-season windstorm, a “hot wind had been caused by an Efrete, a sort of Arabian Night’s demon, who has arrived in Egypt”⁵⁷ to Robert Cairn. Ferrara hopes to kill those who stand between him and the Ferrara family fortune. He is the child of a magic ritual carried out in Egypt in 1893, upon the discovery of the tomb of a powerful magician, the lover of the Egyptian witch queen, and their mummified child. Bruce Cairn, the father of Robert, and Michael Ferrara had brought the child to life, and Ferrara had raised him as his son.⁵⁸ Robert Cairn prevents Ferrara’s plan to claim the fortune and destroy those who knew of his origin, burning the Book of Thoth, freeing a fire demon that destroys Anthony Ferrara.⁵⁹ Robert Cairn is a white male, destroying a hidden danger to an august family lineage, preventing its contagion of other lineages and subsequent racial degeneration of the English elite.

Repeating many of the themes in the late Victorian (imperial) adventure, white supremacy, male privilege, and those of contagion and degeneracy, in his novels, Arthur Grace Merritt communicated them

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 174–76.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 186–90.

to his friend, Howard Phillips Lovecraft and the American pulp fiction writing community. Merritt made more use of the ideas of Madame Helena Blavatsky in his novels than Sax Rohmer, the other transitional figure in the community, introducing those ideas to an American audience. Both Atlantis and Lemuria make frequent appearances in his works, as do mysterious otherworldly mentors of great antiquity and power. *The Moon Pool* published in 1919, offers a deep excursion into the typical Merritt adventure tale. The narrator encounters an old friend on a ship to Melbourne, Australia, scientist David Throckmartin, who has just fled from his archaeological site near Papua New Guinea. Throckmartin, his wife, and a young associate had left behind the civilized world to study a “group of island ruins clustered along the eastern shores of Ponape in the Carolines. . . . twin centres of a colossal riddle of humanity, a weird flower of civilization that blossomed ages before the seeds of Egypt were sown; of whose arts we know little enough and of whose science nothing. . . . cyclopean, megalithic harbours.”⁶⁰ Throckmartin tells the narrator of the moon path and the manifestation of its evil spirit, a shining being, “unearthly and androgynous”, accompanied by otherworldly music that he once dismissed as crass native superstition. It had abducted his young wife, Edith, and his young associate. He wants to return with an army of white men, so that he can reclaim the lost. The moon path takes Throckmartin, so the narrator endeavors to take up the quest.⁶¹

Merritt also introduces a new idea—atavism is not necessarily a bad thing, especially in those of a superior racial identity. Atavistic humans recognize ancient evil more quickly than modern humans. Thora Halverson, a servant, hears the music that heralds the arrival of the Dweller of the Moon Pool. She comes out of her tent, “[s]he was the great Norse type--tall, deep-breasted, moulded on the old Viking lines. Her sixty years had slipped from her, she look like some ancient priestess of Odin . . . Suddenly she raised her arms and made a curious gesture to the moon. It was—an archaic movement; she seemed to drag it from remote antiquity—yet in it was a strange suggestion of power. Twice she repeated this gesture and the tinklings died away.”⁶² Other characters join the narrator in his quest, Olaf Huldricksson, a “Viking of old”

⁶⁰ A(rthur) A. Merritt, *The Moon Pool* (1919; New York: Avon Books, 1951), 4, 11.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 6–9, 31, 34.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 16.

whose wife and child were taken by the Dweller, or as he states Loki, and an Irishman, Larry O'Keefe, described as the O'Keefe, an airman who has crashed into the ocean only to be rescued by the narrator. Larry believes that the family banshee will come for him, receives visits from a leprechaun, and assumes the otherworldly spirits who are against the Dweller are the Tuatha De Danann of Irish legend.⁶³ Without his atavistic friends, Larry and Olaf, the narrator would not have been able to defeat the Dweller, one, a Celtic hero, and the other, a Viking Berserker.

Merritt was a friend and something of a mentor to Howard Phillips Lovecraft. Lovecraft was one of two men who had enormous influence on American popular culture through his written works. The other man was a younger author whom Lovecraft mentored, Robert Ervin Howard. They made white supremacy (and the racial hierarchy), male privilege, fear of degeneracy and contagion, anchors of the American imagination, narrative after narrative, and then later in film after film. No one thought to question them, others imitated them.

Howard Phillips Lovecraft popularized one idea beyond all others--the dangers of the Other to the Anglo-Saxon genome. Unlike his mentor, Merritt, Lovecraft continued to see atavism, representative of degeneracy and devolution, as a danger. His short story, "The Lurking Fear," reveals the mystery of the Martense family on Tempest Mountain. The narrator has made a career out exploring old legends, his "love of the grotesque and the terrible" leading him on a series of quests. He comes to the mountain, "spectral and desolate," investigating the wholesale destruction of a village, struck by lightning, in which the bodies of dismembered residents were discovered.⁶⁴ He interviews the local residents, whom he describes as "poor mongrels."⁶⁵ They tell him "tales of a daemon which seized lone wayfarers after dark either carrying them off or leaving them in a frightful state of gnawed dismemberment; while sometimes they whispered of blood trails leading toward the distant mansion. Some said the thunder called the lurking fear out of its

⁶³ Ibid., 39–49.

⁶⁴ Howard Phillips Lovecraft, "The Lurking Fear," in *The Complete Fiction of H. P. Lovecraft* (New York: Chartwell Books, 2016), 238, 240.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 239.

habitation, while others said the thunder was its voice.”⁶⁶ He calls the residents, squatters, who he “found curiously likeable in many ways. Simple animals they were, gently descending the evolutionary scale because of their unfortunate ancestry and stultifying isolation.”⁶⁷ He discovers that the Martense family had last been seen in 1810, following a series of lightning strikes near the mansion and the murder of Jan Martense. As he traces the stories of demons, a monstrous being attacks him when he spends the night at the mansion, killing his armed guards. The monstrous being was “a filthy whitish gorilla thing with sharp yellow fangs and matted fur. It was the ultimate product of mammalian degeneration; the frightful outcome of isolated spawning, multiplication, and cannibal nutrition above and below the ground.”⁶⁸ It had one brown eye, one blue, a genetic trait of the Martense family. He finds the rest of the family in the caverns under the mansion, a stream of “dwarfed, deformed hairy devils or apes.”⁶⁹ The narrator destroys the mansion, the caverns, and the environs, ending the curse. Over and over again Lovecraft wrote and rewrote the story of cursed families who had devolved into monstrous beings, either through intermarriage with something other than human, an ape or an aquatic beast, and isolated themselves. Often the narrator discovers that he is a member of the cursed family, devolving himself into a cannibalistic being or an aquatic beast.⁷⁰

Atavism was not the only danger Lovecraft saw, he imagined a great evil in the world linked to ancient blood cults, a world in which the Anglo-Saxon and Aryan were under attack. Pure unadulterated racism frequently appears in Lovecraft’s stories, “swarthy, sinister faces with furtive eyes and odd features . . . push-carts crowded the gutters. A sordid, undefinable stench settled over the place.”⁷¹ In “The Horror at Red Hook”, Thomas F. Malone, a New York police detective, believed that his beat, Red Hook, “a maze of hybrid squalor . . . a hopeless tangle and enigma; Syrian, Spanish, Italian, and negro elements” was home

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 244.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 256.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 255.

⁷⁰ Lovecraft, “Facts Concerning the Late Arthur Jermyn and His Family,” *ibid.*, 122–30; “The Rats in the Walls”, *ibid.*, 257–73.

⁷¹ Lovecraft, “The Street,” *ibid.*, 72.

to an ancient cult of demon worshippers, “hellish vestiges of old Turanian-Asiatic magic and fertility cults . . . dark religions antedating the Aryan world,” who kidnapped and sacrificed young toddlers.⁷² His great creation, Cthulhu, reflects this perceived danger. Cthulhu, one of the Great Old Ones, is the center of a worldwide cult, linked to remnants of ancient idols and mysterious structures, in which humans are sacrificed in bloody ceremonies. This cult is seen in action, at a voodoo ceremony in a shunned area of the swamp near New Orleans in “The Call of Cthulhu.”⁷³

Lovecraft mentored the other great influence on American pulp fiction, Robert Ervin Howard, the creator of Conan the Barbarian and a host of other exemplary manly men. For Howard atavism was a good thing, that “barbarism is the natural state of mankind . . . Civilization is unnatural. It is a whim of circumstance. And barbarism must always ultimately triumph.”⁷⁴ Conan was a man’s man, intelligent, fierce, strong and virile, “dark, scarred, with smoldering blue eyes . . . untamed” as the forest primeval.⁷⁵ Conan is a Cimmerian of a pure-blooded Hyborian stock, of Hyperborea, a people of the North, who along with the Aesir and Vanir of Nordheim became the modern Aryans in Howard’s imagined history.⁷⁶ Conan lives life to the fullest extent in his adventures—fighting evil-doers and loving the ladies. Women are swept off their feet into his embrace, even the strongest and most independent succumbs to his forceful attention. “Conan’s fierce eyes glowed with approval as they devoured her thick golden hair, her clear wide eyes, her milky skin, sleek with exuberant heath, the firm swell of her breasts, the contours of her splendid hips.”⁷⁷ Women were objects to Conan, simply attractive beings. Even when they resisted, Conan pressed forward “until the arms that strained against him melted and twined convulsively about his massive neck.”⁷⁸ They

⁷² Lovecraft, “The Horror at Red Hook,” *ibid.*, 335–54.

⁷³ Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu (Found among the Papers of the late Francis Wayland Thurston, of Boston),” *ibid.*, 381–407.

⁷⁴ Robert E. Howard. “Beyond the Black River,” in *Red Nails*, by Robert E. Howard, ed. Karl Edward Wagner (1935; New York: Berkley Publishing Corporation, 1977), 92.

⁷⁵ Howard, “Black River, *ibid.*, 18.

⁷⁶ Howard, “The Hyborian Age,” *ibid.*, 249–79.

⁷⁷ Howard, “The Devil in Iron” in *The People of the Black Circle*, by Robert E. Howard, ed. Karl Edward Wagner (New York: Berkley Publishing Corporation, 1977), 55.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

were venal creatures, calculating and manipulative, who needed a firm hand providing protection and guidance.⁷⁹ Conan dominates all around him, a man among men, admired and honored.

Lovecraft and Howard exchanged letters between 1933 until shortly before Howard's suicide in 1936. They reinforced each other's ideas about white supremacy, male privilege, contagion and racial degeneracy linked to both the immigrant and what they saw as the decline of the West.⁸⁰ Howard sees "good government" as emasculating modern man, saying "[G]eneration by generation men will grow more flabby, slothful, and effeminate", trapped in the gilded cage of civilization.⁸¹ Howard longed for the world of the Gael and the Goth, in which "sagas hum with self-glorification, with praise of the whale-path, and the glory of the foray . . . they were alive; they stung, burned, tingled with Life—life raw and crude and violent doubtless; but Life, just the same and worthy to be classed with best efforts of the intellectual side of man."⁸² He moans, "But, I hardly think, life in this age is worth effort of living."⁸³ Lovecraft encouraged Howard to accept his current circumstances, to continue his embrace of the active life and see civilization as something of a benefit, providing a safe arena in which to engage the world.⁸⁴

Both men agreed white people were under siege; the United States was swamped—hordes of Jews, Slavs, and Asians had overrun whole neighborhoods. Lovecraft blames the high level of violence in American society directly on African Americans, poor whites, Italians and Slavic peoples. Lovecraft asserts "[I]ncidentally, you, of course, realize that all displays of violence in the northeast which you mention are foreign phenomena. Anti-Nazi mobs consist of hysterical Jews urged on by radicals, and all radical groups are of central or southeastern European origin."⁸⁵

⁷⁹ Howard, "Shadows in Zamboula" in *Red Nails*, by Howard, ed. Wagner, 113; Howard, "The People of the Black Circle" in *People of the Black Circle*, by Howard, ed. Wagner, 106.

⁸⁰ S.T. Joshi, David E. Schultz, and Rusty Burke, eds., *A Means to Freedom: The Letters of H. P. Lovecraft and Robert E. Howard, 1933–1936* (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2011), 519–22.

⁸¹ Letter dated March 6, 1933, in *Means to Freedom*, ed. Joshi, Schultz, and Burke, 543.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 547–48.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 544.

⁸⁴ Letter dated Nov. 2, 1933, *ibid.*, 674.

⁸⁵ Letter dated April 7, 1934, *ibid.*, 754.

What is true, none of the bloggers writing on QAnon, 8chan, 4chan, Stormfront and other sites offer any new arguments. Mike Cernovich, for example, considers feminism, “an unjustified form of affirmative action, but a perverse destructive delusion.”⁸⁶ Echoing Howard, the Proud Boys emphasize masculine domination of the female, whose proper role is that of a nurturer, whereas man is the hunter. They imagine a return to a golden age, an idealized Nordic world, male-centric and stridently antifeminist. They demand men’s rights and traditional roles for women.⁸⁷ They are simply repeating arguments that have oozed into the mainstream from late British writers, American pulp fiction, and comic books/graphic novels. They tap into older myths, such as the blood libel, and give them new life. Is it any wonder, many Americans find the messages convincing? The message has been delivered, myth after myth, narrative after narrative, film after film. Ernst Cassirer was right.

⁸⁶ Marantz, *Anti-Social*, 144.

⁸⁷ Stern, *Proud Boys and the White Ethnostate*, 21, 33–38, Wendling, *Alt-Right*, 62–71.

INSURGENT PUBLISHING FOR THE RESISTANCE

TIMOTHY SHEARD

There are many ways to resist the current vicious attacks on the working class perpetrated by the Republican regime and their ruling class masters. One simple way is to ask someone why they have told a joke that relies on racist, sexist, homophobic or anti-immigrant stereotypes, and then engage the individual in a conversation centered on listening. Another is to join in mass demonstrations, political and grass roots organization building. Or send letters, emails, and phone calls to representatives on the different levels of government.

As a writer, writing mentor, and publisher, I see Story as a powerful medium for informing, inspiring and mobilizing large numbers of people. A mysterious alchemy of the mind comes into play when we read a good story, or watch it in a movie or TV show, or listen to a ballad as it is sung. Since the protagonist is a sympathetic character, we tend to walk in the character's shoes. We see their life as it unfolds (or unwinds), suffer in their defeats and feel their pain. We laugh and cry with joy when they overcome terrible odds. We mourn when they die. Indeed, studies of brain activity show that when we are immersed in a good book or watch an engaging movie or television show, our brain function mimics that of a sleeper's dream. We slip into a daydream, and it is that dream-like quality that allows the story to touch a deep emotional chord.

Reading stories promotes empathy for the class or community in which the characters struggle to find safety, security, love, peace, or redemption.

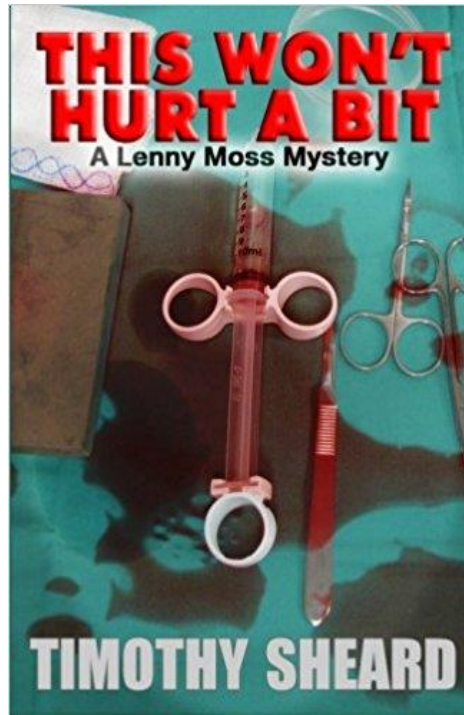
My efforts to contribute to the aspirations of the working class began with writing novels about hospital workers. A nurse with decades of hospital duty, I saw that in the majority of stories that were published in books or aired in movies or on television, the heroes were doctors or

psychiatrists. The service workers who maintained the institution and provided most of the services were either absent from the plot, window dressing or foils for the professional classes.

I knew the real hospital world was different. Like an old English country village, the occupational groups in the hospital are divided along strict class lines. When I first worked in the hospitals, nurses still talked of the recent past, when they were required to stand up and give their chair to a physician should he approach the nursing station.

I decided to write about the overlooked, underappreciated hospital workers: the nursing aides, messengers, cooks and dietary aides, the ward clerks, morgue attendants and custodians, and the nurses along with the doctors, to be sure. Since the books are murder mysteries, I needed a detective. The idea for my hero jumped out at me one day as I was having lunch with a custodian friend who was a militant, courageous and imaginative shop steward in 1199. Who better to investigate a murder than a *shop steward*? Any amateur sleuth must have the standing in his community to question suspects and potential witnesses. He/she must also have the skills needed to evaluate the testimony, examine physical evidence, and tease out the truth from the web of lies and omissions found in any investigation. My shop steward friend did all of that and more. And as a custodian wearing blue work clothes and handling a mop, he went about the hospital unnoticed, a perfect opportunity to investigate wrongdoing.

So was born Lenny Moss, hospital custodian, union steward and fearless detective.



In the first novel, a racist security guard stops a black worker at the hospital exit and searches the young man's bag. But the guard does not search the bag of a white doctor leaving at the same time, triggering an angry outburst from the black worker. I began the novel in 1991 (it was published in 2001), long before the phrase "walking while black" was in the mainstream discourse. Having witnessed the scene in my own hospital and been angered by it, I made it the opening of the first book.

When the white worker is found murdered, the police arrest the young black man (of course). His friends go to their best, most militant shop steward, Lenny, and ask him to free the accused from jail. When Lenny asks how he is supposed to do it, his friend replies "You gotta find out who killed the doc."

Along the way, Lenny represents workers accused of hospital infractions before frontline managers. He joins with his co-workers to march on a boss's office to protest an unfair labor

practice (“Always bring a crowd.”). And he encourages other workers to support the union by taking initiative in their department.

After publishing my third Lenny Moss novel, I worked at informing other labor unions about the series. The idea was by giving the books to workers in their facilities, reading would inform and encourage rank-and-file members to become more active in the union. By the time my fifth book was in print, I was hearing feedback from some labor activists that the books indeed were helpful in their campaigns.

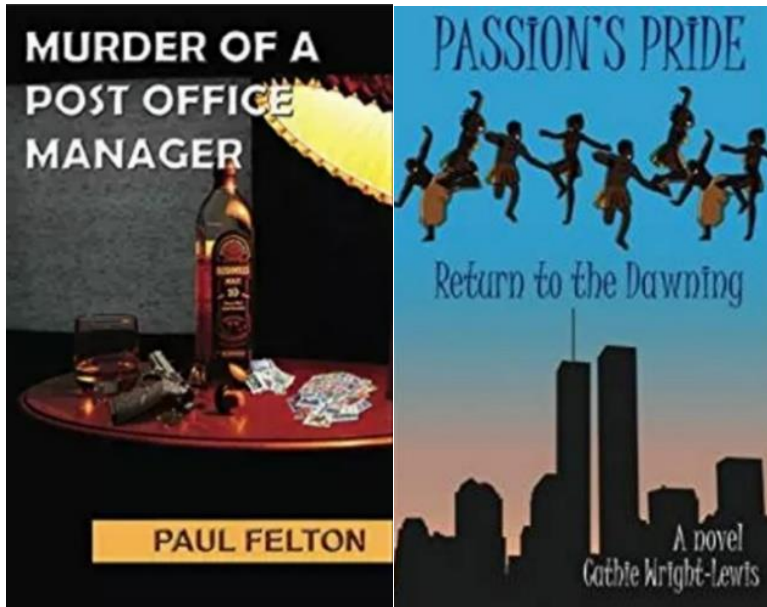
One steward in a California hospital came up to my book table at a Labor Notes conference. He told me, “Oh, yeah, you’re that Lenny Moss guy. We had trouble for a long time getting our members to volunteer as stewards. So, I gave away my copies of your books, and pretty soon we had more volunteers than we knew what to do with.”

The power of Story.

Building a Working-Class Publishing Company

At labor conferences around the country, I met activists who had manuscripts languishing “in the drawer that mainstream publishers had rejected. A sucker for a good cause, I agreed to look at first one novel, then another, then a memoir, and then a book of case studies of organizing campaigns. Having learned how to reprint my own novels, all of which had gone out of print, I thought, “Why not? I’m learning the technique of producing a book. Why can’t I become a publisher, too?”

Each book required some measure of revision. A novel about a dedicated steward in a big postal facility (*Murder of a Post Office Manager*) needed the dialogue punched up a bit.



A novel about the link between the Twin Towers falling on September 11, 2001, and America's history of slavery (*Passion's Pride*) had divergent threads that needed to be brought together in the end. A book about organizing and education (*What Did You Learn at Work Today?*) needed some of the academic jargon replaced by common language so that a worker with a high school education could readily understand it. A wonderful historical novel about coal miners (*Sixteen Tons*) that was rooted in interviews of retired miners needed to move beyond the actual historical facts, because in the first draft too many characters were dying off!

As my catalogue grew, it became clear I had to take the business side of the enterprise more seriously and not treat it as a fun hobby. It's a labor of love, certainly, but it can't continue to lose money year after year, which it been doing. I was about to retire after 43 years of hospital duty, and I would no longer be able to afford subsidizing the charity work.

Print-On-Demand Publishing

The technological breakthrough of print-on-demand publishing (POD) has enabled me and scores of other writer-editors to set up a publishing company on a shoestring budget. For those with really

no money to underwrite a book production, POD allows an editor to upload a book to the print and distribution company for free or for a small fee. Ingram's Spark charges \$49 to upload a book, for example, and their catalogue reaches booksellers worldwide.

Once the book is in publication, the publisher does not have to maintain any inventory at all. When a customer orders a book from a bookshop or from Amazon.com, the wholesale company prints and ships the book. When a customer orders the book directly from the publisher's web site, the editor can tell the printing company to print the book and ship it to the customer.

At times I have fulfilled book orders sent to my web site while on vacation far away from my home and office.

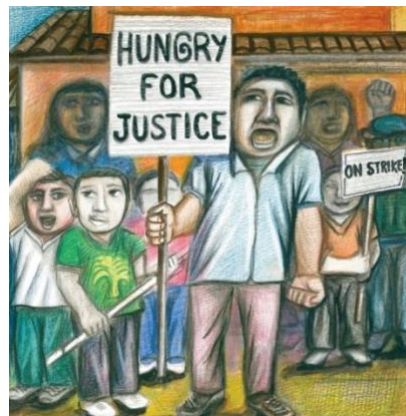
Social Justice for Elementary School Children

Elementary school educators describe the profound impact that stories have on young children: "If they can see it, they can be it." In other words, if children see a boy or a girl acting in a courageous or intelligent or honorable way, they will believe that they can grow up to be that kind of person. The corollary, chilling in its import, adds, "If they *don't* see it, they will never believe they can be it."

If little girls and boys grow up with stories where the girl is not the heroic, fearless hero, but instead is a passive observer of the action or is absent from the story altogether, members of both genders will believe that girls cannot be independent, assertive, confident actors in their own storyline. They will never believe the cowgirl can rescue the cowboy tied to the railroad tracks as the train comes barreling down toward him.

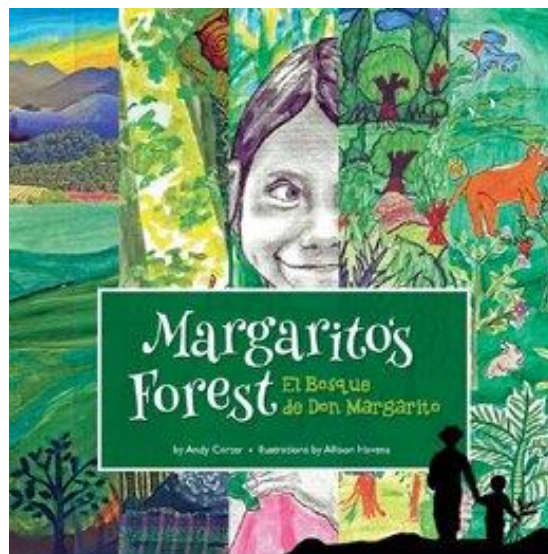
I love a woman who can kick ass.

With the lesson of “If they can see it” in mind, I considered publishing children’s books. Ann Berlak, a retired elementary teacher and lifelong social activist, pitched a book about fast food workers and the Fight for \$15 for age 4–10, *Joelito’s Big Decision*. She asks, “If we can teach children how a caterpillar transforms into a butterfly, why can’t we teach how a society can be transformed into a just and peaceful world?” That was good enough for me, I worked with her on the story, adding a little suspense and translating the text into Spanish to provide a bilingual book. An organizer in Miami pitched a sweet story about a boy who is forbidden from picking the mangoes growing in the apartment building courtyard, *Manny and the Mango Tree*. Because some of the adults are undocumented, the boy’s mom is afraid to complain to the building owner. So, the children organize their own protest march, with *no* grownups. In the end, the owner relents, and the families have a big mango party.



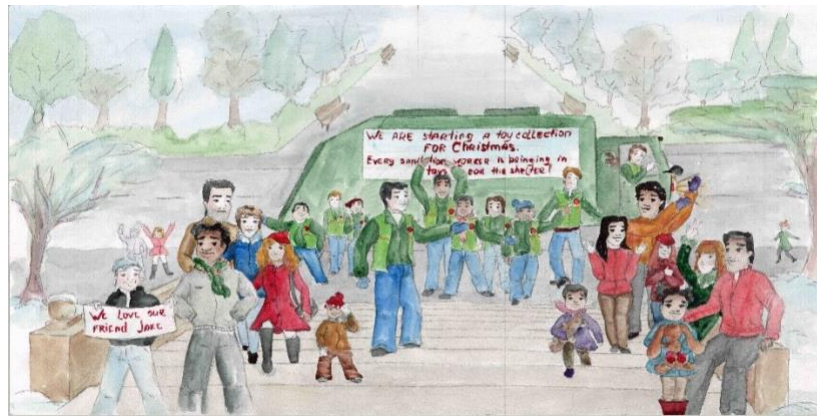
More stories came my way: *Jimmy's Carwash Adventure* is about a little boy who supports the carwash workers (los carwasheros), even though his dad is not sympathetic to their strike. Jimmy rides his little pedal car all the way to the carwash to support the workers, teaching his conservative dad a lesson in social solidarity.

Margaritot's Forest is a gorgeous book about a Maya village whose members had been chased up into the mountains by the military junta. There a young man begins planting trees. Though teased by his neighbors, he continues, as do his children, until they have a beautiful forest which they nurture and revere. I thought the book would inspire children to plant trees in their own neighborhood.



Good Guy Jake is a story that teaches young children (and their parents and grandparents) how a union advocates for a wrongly terminated sanitation worker. “Good guy” Jake has for years been taking toys from the trash, a violation of city regulations. Jake repairs and paints the toys, then he gives them to poor children in a local shelter at Christmas. Jake’s union takes the case to arbitration, where the union lawyer calls in a bevy of children with their toys. The children testify

before the arbitration judge how much Jake inspired them and taught them to believe they were loved and valued in the city.



With more children’s books in production, Hard Ball Press invites children to read about racial discrimination, the roots of climate degradation, the role banks play in robbing communities of control over their own wealth (“finance capitalism”), and a new look at Cinderella who, a year after marrying the prince, realizes she has joined a family of oppressive, ignorant, sexist wankers. Should she run away, or should she try to change the kingdom’s social structure? The wonderful transformative gift of story.

“THIS IS PRECISELY THE
TIME WHEN ARTISTS GO
TO WORK.
THERE IS NO TIME FOR
DESPAIR, NO PLACE FOR
SELF-PITY,
NO NEED FOR SILENCE,
NO ROOM FOR FEAR.
WE SPEAK, WE WRITE, WE
DO LANGUAGE.
*THAT IS HOW
CIVILIZATIONS HEAL*”

-TONI MORRISON

ART



PHOTO ESSAY

IRIDESSENCE / ESSENCE WALKER

NMR is a shared space among academics, artists, and activists to highlight and discuss their work. The artist-in-residence is chosen each year to share their work with the journal's readership. Their work will be featured both in the print journal and on the website.

The North Meridian Review's 2022 artist-in-residence is Iridessence!

Iridessence /Essence Walker is a model, self-portrait, and performance artist based in New Orleans, Louisiana. Her work often features vintage, theatrical, and historical themes and marries them to radical self-love in a socio-political scape that marginalizes people of size and color.

I dreamed I was



HAT BY JOHN FREDERICK

WANTED

in my Maidenform bra

Name: Star Flower*

Reward: Just wearing it!

Distinguishing characteristics: Circular stitched cups in pretty petal pattern. Twin elastic bands beneath cups. Upper bands adjust to make bra fit like custom-made. Lower bands make bra breathe with wearer.

Physical description: White broadcloth. A, B, C cups. 2.50.

Last seen: In stores everywhere. Looking *ravishing*.

®REG. U.S. PAT. OFF. ©1960 MAIDENFORM, INC., NEW YORK 16, N.Y.





















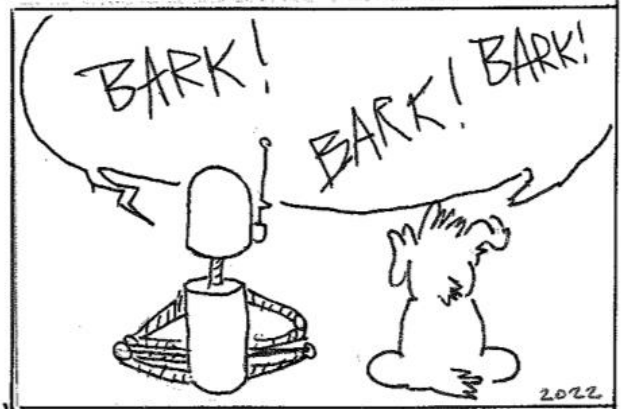
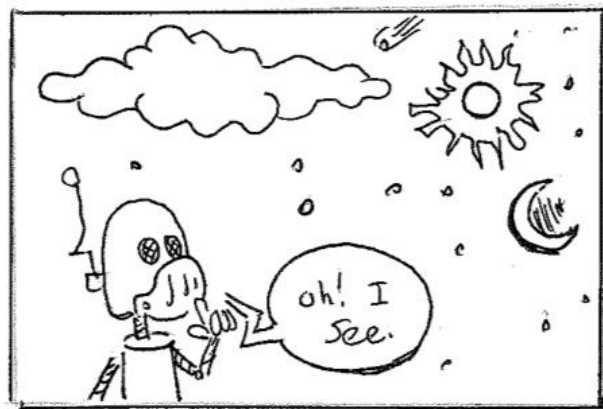
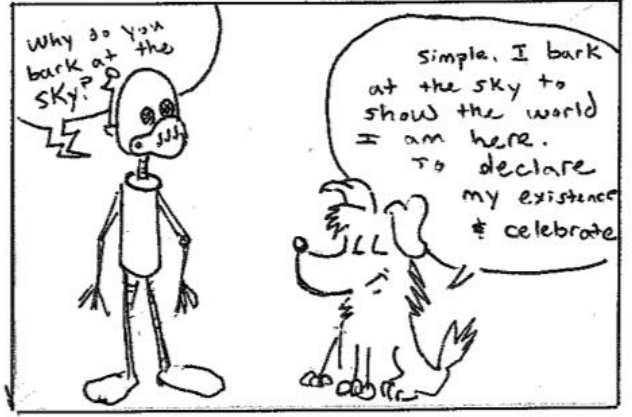
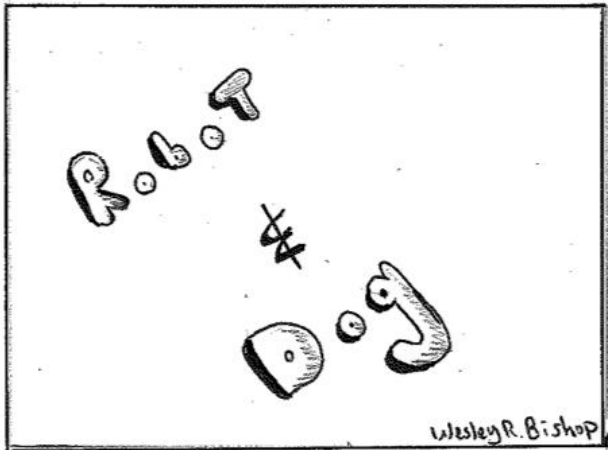








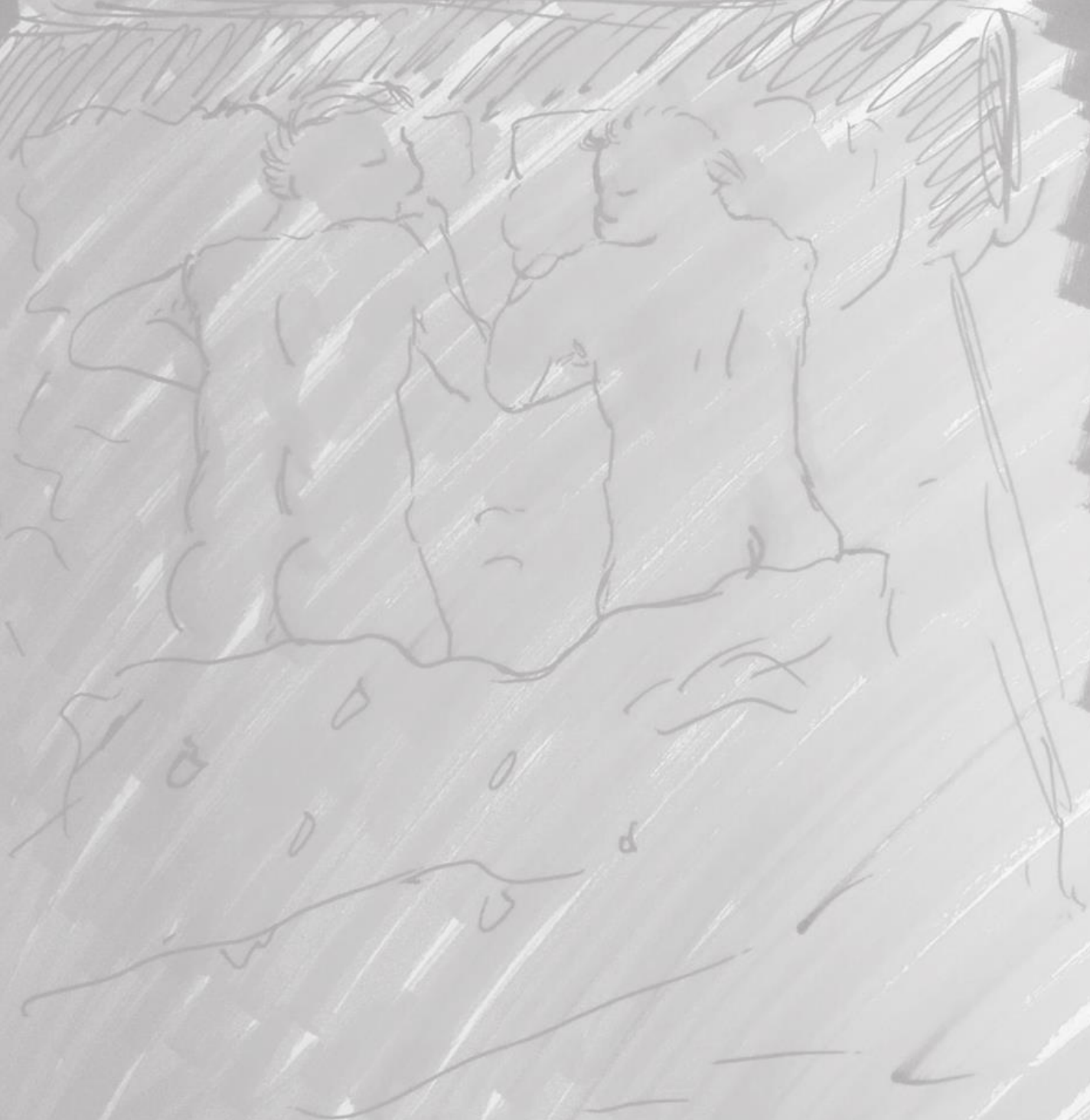




“TRY TO KEEP THEM,
POET,
THOSE EROTIC VISIONS OF
YOURS,
HOWEVER FEW OF THEM THERE
ARE THAT CAN BE STILLED.
PUT THEM,
HALF-HIDDEN,
IN YOUR LINES.”

-CAVAFY

POETRY



“CONSTANTINE”

DAVID MILLEY

“Your poem is like Cavafy,” she said. I looked up.
“Do you know his work?” she asked. I shook my head.
I’d written of the first of my loves, how he’d kissed me
in the street, a bold move on a sunlit autumn day.
Embarrassed by my ignorance, but grateful for the cue,
I found a book by Cavafy and began to read his verse.

Teachers have words to warn us all away:
Ginsburg is “undisciplined,” Whitman’s “immature.”
Bishop? “Too fastidious,” Baldwin? “Full of rage.”
We’re shunted early off, to travel safer roads.
Sandburg and Frost, Wordsworth and Pope –
safer, straighter voices fill supplanted shelves.

The minders of history pick out every particle of pink,
so voids mark scars where our forebears’ work was torn.
Our stories die behind iron gates. We grow, bent,
our brains encased by gay-shaped blanks.
Dark triangles remain, stains on faded prison garb.
Cold ash bears witness where faggots have been burned.

So, late in life, learning of Cavafy, I come to his book,
hearing what my hearer heard: a man loving men.
Tattered linen suits, patched to seem respectable again,
worn by hungry, timid men to wild, illicit trysts.
Moonlight pulling love, like water drawn from sand.
Trade routes stretching back to Ithaca of old.

Fully immersed in his volume now, I remember
places I have never been, hands I’ve never held.
I feel again the heated breath of men I’ve never met.
Eyes closed, I breathe the steam of crowded baths,
luxuriate in Constantine Cavafy’s verse,
bold, erotic memories of an Alexandrian god



“WOMAN SINGING”

NANCY COOK¹

America, for thee we sing.
This December day, our song an aria.
not choked by blind history. Breathe
the open-air promise of emancipation.
Stand tall. Hear: Woman singing.²

We'll walk hand in hand. For I have a dream -
that we shall all be free. O sweet soprano
of harmony: Woman singing.
Testimony to the fierce urgency of Now.
We are not afraid. We will live in peace.³

Sing with me! Celebrate the election
of America's first Black president.
Can you hear? Woman singing!
America, America, God shed his light
on thee. America, we are one.⁴

Solidarity white on the darkest
of Saturday Nights. Nothing is funny.
Below a cracked glass ceiling: Woman singing.
And even though it all went wrong... Stand
before the Lord of Song, sing Hallelujah.⁵

¹ *Woman Singing* is the title of a short story by Simon Ortiz. The story's protagonist falls in love with another man's wife because her singing takes him back to his native homeland. Turning to the music he hears into his own song, the man finds the strength to return to his People. A central theme of the story is that language can help heal damage done by racism and poverty.

² On Easter Sunday, 1939, contralto Marian Anderson gave a concert on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial before an estimated crowd of 75,000. The concert was arranged by Interior Secretary Harold Ickes, at the urging of first lady Eleanor Roosevelt and National Association for the Advancement of Colored People executive secretary Walter White, after Anderson had been denied the opportunity to perform at DAR Constitution Hall explicitly on the basis of her race. *America* (“My Country Tis of Thee”) was the first song Anderson performed, and the words “for thee we sing” were substituted for “of thee I sing.”

³ On August 28, 1963, at the conclusion of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech at the Lincoln Memorial, in which he referenced “the fierce urgency of now.” Among the performers at the event was 22-year-old Joan Baez, who sang what was rapidly becoming the anthem for the Civil Rights Movement, *We Shall Overcome*.

⁴ “We are One” was the theme of Barack Obama's 2008 inauguration. Beyoncé sang *America the Beautiful* at the event, then invited everyone on stage and in the audience to join in to sing it.

⁵ Singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen died on November 7, 2016, the day before Donald Trump defeated Hillary Clinton in that year's presidential election. Dressed in Suffragette white, Kate McKinnon, cast member of NBC's *Saturday*

O, say can you see the rockets' red glare -
it's a perilous fight, and shame will get you
blacklisted. But this night, see: bright stars,
bursting, on the world stage. Women singing,
star-spangled, living hope, dawn's light.⁶

The dulcet echo of a French horn.
More than music, heroism: Woman singing.
For every woman. My country tis of thee.
I have not lost my voice. Persist. Find one word
and then another. This the promise of. America.⁷

Night Live who often played Clinton in comedy sketches, opened the November 12 *SNL* episode with a somber rendition of Cohen's most venerated song, *Hallelujah*.

⁶ The Chicks (formerly the Dixie Chicks) sang the National Anthem on the final day of the 2020 Democratic National Convention. They had last performed the song at the 2003 Super Bowl, just months before publicly expressing "shame" over fellow Texan George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq. The group was blacklisted by country music stations and performance venues for the comment.

⁷ Former Arizona Congresswoman (2003–2012) Gabby Giffords spoke at the 2020 Democratic National Convention. Her brief talk, which was preceded by a clip of her playing *America* ("My Country Tis of Thee") on the French Horn, was remarkable not only for its focus on gun control but because Giffords herself was the victim of an assassination attempt in 2011. Shot in the head at close range with a 9 mm pistol, she is still recovering from her injuries which include aphasia, an impairment of speech and language.

“WOMEN’S WORK”

NANCY COOK

1.

She is standing at the sink, pale green
rubber gloves up to her elbows. Outside
the window the sun hides behind the trees
and the lone homestead fox scuttles across
the frozen backyard shallows. The one
standing at the sink loves this scene
but she longs for the warmth of longer
days, her hands impatient to burrow in dirt
instead of sudsy water, to bury pumpkin
and sweet potato seeds, stake tomato
plants and trellis the beans, arrange
geraniums and marigolds in fine order.

But she finishes washing the dishes, and
after, kneads her chapped hands with palm oil
the fragrance of hibiscus, his favorite. She
massages her husband’s shoulders while he
catches her up on the news, the latest on NPR,
in the *New York Times*, edited down to essentials.
By the time he gets to sports and local updates
he is so ready to enter her, she can sense it,
and she is agreeable, she will satisfy his longing.
Later, she waits for him to drift off. She retreats
to the living room, there to watch the movies
she loves, with strong female leads, or foreign
films, subtitled, an elegant glass of merlot close
at hand, bare feet tucked beneath her thighs.

2.

She keeps a volume of Anna Ahkmatova’s
collected works in her bedside table drawer.
Her husband asked her once, “Do you like best
Ahkmatova’s early passionate love poems or
her later passionate political poems?” “Yes,”
she’d answered. Today he glances at his i-pad,
says “Oscar nominations are out.” An odd
figure, this Oscar, androgynously slim
and featureless, gold gloss, a long crusader’s
sword concealing masculine parts, if any.

(How fortunate, as winners are prone to grasp the statuette with such ferocious enthusiasm just there.) Ninety-two years old, the coveted little man. Largely unchanged.

And this year, the nominees are...

Wars, mobsters, muscle cars, Hitler youth, sociopath clowns, bloodsport-style divorce, drugs, sex, and murder, family, greed, and murder, and oh yes, Little Women. Based on the book written by a woman. Movie directed by a woman. A woman not nominated for best director. As no woman was nominated for best director. What is it Ahkmatova wrote? "Who will grieve for this woman? Does she not seem too insignificant for our concern? Yet in my heart I never will deny her." I never will deny her.

3.

In the old study where the fireplace still crackles every winter with the blaze of burning oak and ash, each has a writing desk. His and hers. Although it is Friday evening, she is seated at her computer, typing. He adds a log to the fire, glides up behind her, asks what she is working on. They've agreed weekends are for home and leisure. "I'm writing to your daughter. Tomorrow is their seventh anniversary." "Really?" he says. "I'd forgotten." He settles in a comfy chair at hearthside, picks up his tablet, resumes a crossword puzzle started earlier. "Speaking of anniversaries," he says, "tomorrow is the fourth annual women's march." "Yes, I know," she says. Back in 2017, they'd talked of driving down to D.C., but in the end had stayed in Nashua and watched on television as streets across the country filled with (mostly) women voicing opposition to the new president.

A giant blown-up photograph of that day is on display at the National Archives, official keeper of America's history. The photograph, however, has been doctored. The protest signs in demonstrators' hands are changed: any reference to female anatomy removed,

all mention of Trump expunged. The whole thing depoliticized. Ironic. So this is how history gets revised, one erasure at a time. And yet, haven't women made strides? Barely one hundred years ago, they couldn't even vote. And now, just this week, Virginia ratified the ERA, the final state to do so, guaranteeing, with constitutional fiat, women's equal rights.

4.

There's still work to do. The Justice Department proclaims the days of burning bras are long past, the ERA is dead, the proposed constitutional amendment having expired. "Any interest in a road trip?" She looks up from the laundry she is sorting. She's interested, no matter the destination. But she asks, "What do you have in mind?" "An exhibit in the city. A collection of artifacts, women's work in science, architecture, trade; as artists, printers, undertakers. Also writers, naturalists and midwives, et cetera." Her eyes grow animated, the laundry is forgotten. "When can we leave?" On the train, she reads about the woman curating the collection, her quest to find and safeguard evidence of women's independence. Two hundred of her best finds make up the display called "Five Hundred Years of Women's Work."

She recalls that decades ago, as a graduate student, before marriage or a career, she read a book entitled "Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years." Now she wonders what has happened to those other 19,500 years, she wonders where all the years have gone.



“TOY TRAIN”

ILONA HEGEDÛS

There is still a way for art to reach the masses.
All it takes is a group of youngsters,
talent and paint.
A grown man in a black suit,
sitting on top of a blue toy train.
The image will be painted over the next day,
of course,
but it will not be forgotten.
Yes, you are allowed to laugh at the king.
Or the PM.
I'm glad I have seen that one.



“UNTITLED”

RICARDO QUINTANA-VALLEJO

Today I was afraid the Universe would end
of all consuming fire or second flooding,
if that's more your style. It would start
with a single broken toaster or light rain,
but the key is it wouldn't stop.

I was afraid of marinara stains on my collar
in the interview I'd been waiting for
for months. Of my words being dull
or simple or not relevant
at all.

Most of all I was afraid of the porch
vanishing where we will sit and rock
when we are old men and watch
our dogs or children play;
Of the wind or fire or rain.

“SOUTHERN TREES
BEAR STRANGE FRUIT
BLOOD ON THE LEAVES
AND BLOOD AT THE
ROOT...”

STRANGE FRUIT

REVIEWS

EXTENDED REVIEW:
DEMOCRACY AS A STRUGGLE AND COMMITMENT:
REVISITING MICHAEL DENNING'S *THE CULTURAL FRONT*

SUSAN CURTIS

Nearly a quarter of a century ago, Michael Denning published *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*. It appeared at a moment when scholars were crafting major reinterpretations of American history—efforts that represented more than the addition of previously untold tales, but wholesale rethinking of how that history unfolded. Ronald Takaki held up a “different mirror” to America’s past; John Demos told a different “family story” about the United States’ colonial and early national history; and Ann Douglas insisted that cultural output in the 1920s best can be understood as “Aframerican” culture.¹ In each of these cases and many others, scholars grappled with the nation’s multicultural reality and sought to decenter powerful European-descended figures (mostly men) in favor of a broader cast of characters whose actions drove the narrative. Denning’s masterful study of a social movement in the 1930s and the scholarly agenda of which it was an important part deserve our attention in a current moment of national and cultural crisis.

¹Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London, New York: Verso, 1997); Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1993); John Demos, *The Unredeemed Captive: A Family Story from Early America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994); and Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995).

The Cultural Front explores a powerful social movement in the 1930s that generated what writer Michael Gold called a “second American Renaissance.” Denning challenged the widely held view that the turn to the left in the depression decade was both brief and of no lasting importance. He demonstrates how the cultural front “proletarianized” American culture, and his portrayal of Thirties culture places working people, emigres, and racial minorities at the center of this renaissance. Franklin D. Roosevelt has a bit part, not the “Superman”/savior imagined by other scholars of the period. Perhaps most helpfully, Denning’s subtitle introduces the concept of a “laboring of American culture,” signifying a process that was “painstaking and difficult” and ultimately incomplete. His is not a book about a “failed revolution,” but rather a necessary reminder of the slow and uneven pace of change.

Scholarly focus on the decade of the 1930s has been trained on Roosevelt’s New Deal, the heyday of Hollywood’s “silver screen,” and the coming of war in Europe and Asia. No wonder most Americans forget the ubiquity of left culture. Denning reminds us that Clifford Odets’s play, *Waiting for Lefty*, was the most widely performed (and most widely banned) play of 1935. Writers such as Meridel Le Sueur and Carlos Bulosan identified labor strikes as the source of their art and commitment. Opposition to war, fascism, and racism characterized the ideology of many artists who made up the “cultural front.” Filmmakers, musicians, playwrights, novelists, and others involved in the culture industry used their talents and positions to draw attention to the plight of working people struggling to survive a devastating economic depression.

Artists and thinkers who contributed to the cultural front did not walk in lock step. Denning identifies a variety of formations that emphasized different aspects of the struggle to proletarianize American culture. He explores literary class war in the rise of proletarian literature and its lasting impact on American letters long after the last manifesto of its early adherents had turned to dust.

Denning shows in a section on the *Grapes of Wrath* how migrants and their narratives engrossed an America witnessing the dispossession of victims of the Dust Bowl and predatory banks. Popular front musical theater put working people—men and women, black and white—on center stage. Another section of the book examines Orson Welles’s anti-fascist film aesthetic, and another takes readers inside the cartoonists’ strike against Walt Disney.

Perhaps the most revealing of the formations is what Denning calls “the decline and fall of the Lincoln Republic.” The America that had given rise to myths of rugged individualism and self-making could not survive the onslaught of large-scale industrial capitalist production, urban growth, racial and ethnic discrimination, imperial adventures, and the decadent ballyhoo of the Roaring Twenties. Denning attributes the emergence of the cultural front to massive changes taking place in American society and culture. The large organizations that disseminated forms of diversion, information, values, and art had grown exponentially since the dawn of the twentieth century, and that expansive growth created opportunities for men and women previously on the margins of cultural production. This “new class” challenged the familiar structures of capitalism because its members did not own the means of production nor were they exclusively wage earners. The class consisted of emigres, children of working-class families, and people of color, all of whom brought an outsider’s perspective to the production of American culture. They were not apologists for the cultural shibboleths of the nineteenth century. Indeed, they brought new energy, commitment, sounds, and images to American life.

Denning uses John Dos Passos’s *U.S.A. Trilogy* to chart the fall of the Lincoln Republic. For Dos Passos, the execution of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti in 1927 marked the beginning of the end of the United States as a republic, and he wrote *The 42nd Parallel* so that Americans would never forget that they had called for the death of innocent men. In 1919, Dos

Passos offered a biting critique of the wicked alliance between warmongers in government, opportunists and profiteers in business, and the advertising class to make a war to protect big business palatable to the masses called upon to give their lives on the battlefield. In *The Big Money*, the radical modernist went on to follow the protagonists after the war as they instantiated consumer culture at the expense of democracy. Dos Passos and many of his contemporaries in the cultural front recognized that the world of small-scale production, ethnic homogeneity, striving individuals, and the agrarian pastoral was gone (if it ever existed), and they used their talents to make sense of lived experience in urban, industrial America at a moment not of glory but of failure.

Three aspects of Denning's masterful recuperation of a movement and a cultural moment stand out. The first has to do with those who brought the cultural front into existence, and the second involves the demise of the movement. The alpha and the omega of the 1930s cultural front remind us that reform, revolutionary change, and social movements arise in historical circumstances for specific reasons—historical change is neither unidirectional nor continuous. Agents of change lurch from one moment to the next, not knowing what the outcome of their actions will be, fired by a social vision and dreams of justice, making progress and missteps in turn. Movements like these rarely die out on their own. To dream of a different (better) world means that what currently exists must be dismantled and rebuilt, and that can be frightening to those who have huge stakes in the world as it is. Denning offers an explanation for the demise of the cultural front that is as compelling as his explanation for its rise; it is worth dwelling on both. The third dimension of Denning's project that demands our attention in the second decade of the twenty-first century is his commitment to writing about past radical moments to keep alive the memory of ancestors who dared to challenge the status quo and who give agents of change in the

present moment the reassurance that they are not the first, nor will they be the last, to demand social justice.

The creators of this cultural renaissance in the 1930s came from backgrounds other than the privileged white elite typically associated with cultural production. “The heart of this cultural front was a new generation of plebeian artists and intellectuals who had grown up in the immigrant and black working-class neighborhoods of the modernist metropolis,” writes Denning. As children of migrants and immigrants, “they were caught between the memories and stories of their parents and the realities of urban streets and shops.”² They grappled with the dissonance between their parents’ past and their present. As outsiders, they took the lofty ideals of freedom and equality seriously and demanded that they apply to their lives. Democracy was not an inert condition; rather it was a dynamic process that demanded action and commitment.³

Across the centuries, outsiders have always been the source of energy and renewal in America. The “giddy multitude” of the seventeenth century challenged the cultural and religious strictures of Christians in British North America and engaged in interracial relationships, explored each other’s’ belief systems, and identified shared grievances.⁴ Nineteenth-century popular music depended on music and dance innovations arising from free and enslaved African-descended people.⁵ At the end of the century, another cultural reorientation occurred thanks to the millions of immigrants arriving on America’s shores, urban wageworkers, and African Americans who

² Denning, *Cultural Front*, xv.

³ For a superb example of marginalized people fighting for democracy and the guarantee of equality, see Courtney Thompson, “Capturing Democracy: Black Women Activists and the Struggle for Equal Rights, 1920s–1970s.” (Ph.D. diss., Purdue University, 2011).

⁴ For an excellent study of this oppositional activity from the underclass and the response to their actions, see Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

⁵ For an excellent study of the impact of African Americans on early nineteenth-century popular culture, see Kevin M. Scott, “Rituals of Race: Mount, Melville, and Antebellum America” (Ph. D. diss., Purdue University, 2004).

began escaping oppression in the South after 1877.⁶ Elsewhere I have argued that Americans' embrace of ragtime music and cakewalk dancing, both introduced by African American artists and performers, signaled and hastened the demise of Victorian culture in the United States.⁷

In each of these instances, Americans found themselves at a crisis point involving conflicts over land, wealth, and power. The truism that America is a "Christian nation" ignores the fact that most inhabitants of North America held unorthodox or heterodox ideas that were dismissed in a campaign to sacralize the landscape and to demonize, then trivialize folk beliefs.⁸ The popular myth of the self-made man in antebellum America papers over the social reality of an emergent market capitalist system that reduced all workers to some form of slavery. In the absence of interracial solidarity, white workers could be mollified by the pitiful "wages of whiteness."⁹ After the Civil War, as new modes of production tied workers to machines, anger and resentment exploded in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Scattered across the country, one could find budding interracial cooperation. In Wilmington, North Carolina, blacks and whites owned businesses and won election to a bi-racial municipal government, which was overthrown in an armed coup in 1898.¹⁰ In other parts of the South, they collaborated in Farmers' Alliances, which were determined to cut out the middlemen to retain greater profits for agricultural producers.¹¹ Those with a vested interest in commercial agriculture took whatever measures necessary—from

⁶ John Higham, "The Reorientation of American Culture in the 1890s," in *Writing American History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972).

⁷ Susan Curtis, *Dancing to a Black Man's Tune: A Life of Scott Joplin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994).

⁸ Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*.

⁹ David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London, New York: Verso, 1991).

¹⁰ For much of the twentieth century, the coup was misnamed a "race riot." For a contemporary view, see Charles Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1901).

¹¹ Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

election shenanigans to terror and arson—to break the alliance. After the stock market crash of 1893, desperate working people went on strike only to be met time and again with armed force.

Even as vibrant forms of cultural expression from men and women on the margins found a warm reception in the popular culture, the moneyed powers and their allies in and out of government crushed the hopes of workers of all races and ethnic backgrounds for a different order, a decent life, and access to rights guaranteed in the nation’s founding documents. Even the cultural contributions were up for grabs in what Eric Lott has called a matter of “love and theft.”¹² Astonishingly, the grim decade of the 1890s, marked by class warfare, economic depression, imperial expansion, and widespread homelessness, became in relatively short order “The Gay Nineties.” Richard V. Culter’s cartoon series by that name drained the anger, class conflict, and racial difference out of the decade, and nostalgia for the era took the form of Gay Nineties contests and hard times parties in the 1920s and 1930s.¹³ Historians in the 1910s and 1920s rendered leaders of oppositional movements as crackpots and charlatans, and popular writers such as Jack London, Josiah Flynt, and Richard Harding Davis turned homeless people into objects of humor and prurient disdain as tramps, hoboes, “gay cats,” “prushuns,” and bums.¹⁴ And so the fog of amnesia

¹² Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

¹³ Richard V. Culter published a series of ink drawings titled “The Gay Nineties” in *Life Magazine* in the mid-1920s. They were later compiled and published as *The Gay Nineties: An Album of Reminiscent Drawings* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1927). After his untimely death in 1929, his wife tried to copyright the term “Gay Nineties” because of its popularity among advertisers. See Henry Richter to Joseph Schreiber, May 15, 1931, Life Magazine Incorporated, folder Root, Clark, Buckner & Ballantine, box 5, Mss Col 1758 (New York Public Library Archives and Manuscripts, New York, NY). For examples of the popular nostalgia for the 1890s, see GRG to HR, Nov. 30, 1935, folder “Gay Nineties,” box 3, *ibid*.

¹⁴ For historians trivializing Coxe’s Army, see Donald McMurry, *Coxey’s Army: A Study of the Industrial Army Movement of 1894* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1929); and John D. Hicks’s review of the volume in *American Historical Review*, 35 (April 1930): 641–42. Jack London, *The Road* (New York: MacMillan, 1907); Josiah Flynt, “The Tramp and the Railroads,” *Century Magazine* 58 (June 1899): 258–66; Josiah Flynt, “Homosexuality among Tramps,” in Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex: Sexual Inversion* (Philadelphia: F. A. Davis Company, 1915), Appendix A; and Richard Harding Davis, “The Hungry Man Was Fed,” in *Van Bibber and Others* (New York, London: Harper & Bros, 1892).

settled over a period of vast class and racial inequality, vibrant social movements to change the nation, and cultural change wrought largely by immigrants, workers, and racial minorities.

Denning shows how the cultural front of the 1930s met a similar fate as the nation geared up for war. How better to dispatch with an influential social movement than to tar it with the brush of one's international foes. The writers, playwrights, musicians, cartoonists, intellectuals, filmmakers, poets, and actors who imagined a different order in the ruins of capitalism and whose flashpoints included general strikes, the needless execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, and the railroading of the Scottsboro boys—these participants in the cultural front only wanted to push the nation to live up to its founding ideals and to create a social and cultural system designed to deliver on the nation's promises. By the end of World War II, they had been demonized as dangerous enemies of the state and were hounded for supposed “un-American” activity. But Denning refused to end this book on a note of failure. For in truth, the influences of the Popular Front lived on. The world they envisioned did not materialize, but the old world was not unfazed by their social movement and cultural experimentation. Their ideals and work inspired another generation who reignited the call for justice. And he ends his book with a sentence addressed to anyone wishing to create a world they would like to inhabit: “The failure of their laboring of American culture remains our starting point.”¹⁵

Denning's work remains as relevant today as when it first appeared. The Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 and 2021 has exposed once again the deep divisions in American life along both race and class lines. Front-line workers were heroes in the early weeks of 2020, but their heroics did not merit better pay or protection against the virus. Poor and minority communities have been more susceptible to the virus and are vastly overrepresented among the deaths caused by Covid-

¹⁵ Denning, *Cultural Front*, 472.

19, but their plight has not resulted in support for expanded access to decent healthcare. Black Lives Matter activists, who took to the streets peacefully and forcefully to demand justice for the victims of the U.S. police state, found support for their proposed solutions, but they also faced a ferocious backlash by opponents who demonized them as dangerous radicals.

The Cultural Front reminds us that change is not easy and it takes succeeding generations to change laws, modify beliefs and practices, and get even a modicum of justice. The project redirects our attention from government or presidential administration as the source of social change to the rightful focus on people committed to social justice and engaged in solidarity movements. Whenever the United States has taken steps to make the founding ideals more real, organized groups of people usually have been responsible. Each generation must learn that democracy is action; it demands commitment; and people must claim it.

In the end, the stories we tell ourselves and our children and the memories we cherish matter. In the years that Denning was conducting the research for this masterpiece, scholars across the country were debating how to rewrite the tired old narratives of the past in ways that were more accurate, more inclusive, and reflective of all the incidents—uplifting and deplorable—that set historical processes in motion. They were trying to figure out how to tell both a “whole” story as well as vital “parts” of the story.¹⁶ Theirs was an ambitious undertaking. They wanted to integrate findings from the new social history, African American history, ethnic studies, women’s history, gender studies, and cultural history into the “common sense” of American thought. Work by Denning and other scholars who rethought American history in the 1990s remains a valuable antidote to simple-minded curricular initiatives like Donald Trump’s 1776 Commission to instill “patriotic education” and to textbooks filled with elisions and half-truths that later must be

¹⁶ Thomas Bender, “Wholes and Parts: The Need for Synthesis in American History,” *Journal of American History*, 73 (June 1986): 120–36, doi: 10.2307/1903608.

unlearned. Thanks to Denning, we can think about 1930s America and remember how people once on the margins stormed to the center as a cultural front demanding something better in a moment of crisis. As today's activists on the left confront such challenges as environmental devastation, historic social inequalities, and injustice toward people of color, their struggles align them with the men and women who have made the best of America.

EXTENDED REVIEW:
WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY WAS NOT A GOOD MAN

ROBIN AVERBECK

*“Be a friend
to your friend
and also to his friend,
but never be a friend,
to the enemy
of your friend.”*

- Havamal 43, The Poetic Edda¹

Imagine you are handed a book and are asked to read the first few pages of the prologue. You’re introduced to the early morning routines of what becomes clear is an old man. Judging by the fact that he has servants ready to respond to his every need at two in the morning, he is a very wealthy old man. But he’s wistful about the past, and also ready to die. Still, he decides to sit down to do what he has always done — write. Indeed, he has written so much in his lifetime that he has produced over forty books and thousands of newspaper columns. At this point you wonder, ‘what exactly am I reading?’

The opening sketch for a biopic?

The study of an eighteenth-century aristocrat?

Another biography of Winston Churchill?

None of the above it turns out. This is how Kevin M. Schultz’s book about William F. Buckley and Norman Mailer, *Buckley and Mailer: The Difficult Friendship That Shaped the Sixties*, begins. Schultz opens with this scene of Buckley on the doorstep of death and does his best to slather on as much gravitas

¹ Jackson Crawford, ed., *The Poetic Edda: Stories of the Norse Gods and Heroes* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2015), 25.

as possible. Soon, we find that we're getting two for the price of one, for this book is actually about *a pair* of wistful, old men – William F. Buckley, widely regarded as one of the most important public intellectuals of the New Right, and Norman Mailer, the counter-culture-inspiring postwar novelist that wrote such classics as *The Naked and the Dead* and *Armies of the Night*.

But guess what?

Despite coming from seemingly opposite ends of the political spectrum, these two giants from the Greatest Generation were friends! Even “genuine friends”!²

If it's not immediately obvious to you why this biographical detail merits an entire book focused on it, Schultz quickly fills you in. Over the course of their lives, the two “citizen intellectuals” had “debated in huge venues; drunk together in intimate night spots; exchanged dozens of private letters; socialized together at the most memorable parties of the era; traded books, articles, and laughs,” he explains. At this point, you would be forgiven for hoping that what you're really reading is the prologue to a brilliant piece of alternative history fanfiction, where Buckley and Mailer end one of their heady nights discussing the nature of man by drunkenly stumbling on Buckley's schooner and, under the lights of New York City, finally making sweet, forbidden love.

But alas, no. Schultz's focus is rather more mainstream than that, for what bound the seeming opposites together “most vitally of all” was their “shared love of America.”³

So, let's step back for a moment. Even though this Buckley fellow sounds like he had a very sexy lifestyle, who was he, exactly? What did he do? William F. Buckley is best known for founding what was, for decades, the premiere journal of conservative commentary, *The National Review*. He also helped found Young Americans for Freedom, a conservative student organization that acted as a kind of doppelganger to SDS. Buckley would even dip into electoral politics, running for mayor of New York City and, while never

² Kevin M. Schultz, *Buckley and Mailer: The Difficult Friendship That Shaped the Sixties* (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015), 6.

³ *Ibid.*

expecting to win, nonetheless discovering the potential of tapping into the wellspring of voters who would later come to be known as the Reagan Democrats.

And what kind of politics did Buckley promote? As it turns out, on almost every major policy issue of the postwar period, Buckley pushed for the most reprehensible and disastrous position. He first made a splash by publishing *God and Man at Yale*, where he attacked secularism in the university and pushed for abolishing standards of academic freedom to ensure that the prophets of communism and socialism could be purged from institutions of learning. When the Civil Rights Movement began gaining ground in the 1950s, Buckley used the pages of *The National Review* to argue against democracy in the South, promoting the then relatively new re-packaging of racism by arguing that black people simply were not culturally advanced enough to be trusted with the vote. He would stick to this position throughout the 1960s, declining to even slightly reconsider his stance on civil rights until the last years of his life.⁴ Regarding Vietnam, Buckley was the most belligerent of hawks, characterizing any criticism of America's intervention with the failure to take the side of freedom. One could go on, but we'll settle for the headlines of a lifetime of bad takes.

None of this would be of much consequence, however, if Buckley had never managed to make a dent on the nation's politics. But that Buckley *did* have an incredible impact on postwar politics seems to be agreed to by all, both liberal and conservative. In *The New York Times* obituary for Buckley, Nicholas Lemann is quoted discussing his impact on the Reagan administration:

Nicholas Lemann observed in *Washington Monthly* in 1988 that during the Reagan administration "the 5,000 middle-level officials, journalists and policy intellectuals that it takes to run a government" were "deeply influenced by Buckley's example." He suggested that neither moderate Washington insiders nor "Ed Meese-style provincial conservatives" could have pulled off the Reagan tax cut and other policy transformations.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 136.

Speaking of the true believers, Mr. Lemann continued, “Some of these people had been personally groomed by Buckley, and most of the rest saw him as a role model.”⁵

William F. Buckley was, for decades, anywhere and everywhere politics was debated or shaped—in the newspapers, on the lecture circuit, on television. He was so influential that some have even claimed that without Buckley, Reagan would have never seen the presidency.⁶

At this point, this much should be clear: William F. Buckley was one of the most influential builders and proponents of what would come to be called the New Right. This political movement successfully took over national politics with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 and went on to wreak incalculable harm on people in the United States and around the globe. The destruction of the working class, mass incarceration, the erosion of the welfare state into a punitive system of workfare, and the pursuit of two ruinous wars in the Middle East—all these developments, while not solely the projects of the New Right, were spearheaded by their politicians, pundits, and foot soldiers. It is not my purpose here to review the horrors of the last half century, especially as we are dealing with scholars and historians who certainly already know all this. Yet I do feel compelled to highlight only the most obvious consequence: *millions of people have suffered and died because of these political projects.*

Does it not seem reasonable, then, to expect that anyone so integral to their execution to be gazed upon as an agent of horror and tragedy?

The answer, apparently, is no. Because Buckley, it turns out, enjoys yet another distinction: as *The New York Times* put it, “he was often described as liberals’ favorite conservative.”⁷ The documentary record seems to bear this out. As we’ve seen, Schultz wrote a book based on his well-known capacity to be friends with political rivals. But liberals have also written essays about how Buckley should be regarded as a model for public political debate. And after Trump’s 2016 victory, several liberal journalists held Buckley up as

⁵ Douglas Martin, “William F. Buckley is Dead at 82,” *New York Times*, Feb 27, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/27/business/media/27cnd-buckley.html>

⁶ “Commentator William F. Buckley Dies at 82,” *National Public Radio*, Feb 27, 2008, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=68344288>. Granted, this was his son speaking but, it’s perfectly believable that the sentiment was widespread.

⁷ Martin, William F. Buckley is Dead at 82.”

an example of what the GOP used to be like, and how far they've fallen from those heights of civilized discourse that supposedly banished the less appealing fringes of the conservative movement from a serious role in the party. Considering what we know about how central Buckley was to the disaster of postwar American politics, this should strike us as strange. What is going on here?

Let's try to explore this question by looking at two examples of the "Buckley Was Alright" genre. First, we'll pick up where we left off, with Shultz's book on the friendship between Buckley and Norman Mailer.

This is a bizarre book.

From the start, it's not clear what Schultz intends to do, or why he thinks the relationship between the two men merits several hundred pages. That the two men were important to the politics and culture of the postwar decades is indisputable—but in that case, why not write a book about one or the other? Clearly, Shultz thinks we have something to learn from the intersection between their two lives and perspectives. And he's not entirely wrong—but the lessons one could derive from the story probably aren't those that he had in mind.

For starters, much of the content serves as a powerful reminder of how toxic celebrity culture is to politics. Mailer and Buckley were public intellectuals at a time when that status meant you might impact public debate, and that power also offered membership in an exclusive clique of writers, artists, pundits, and journalists. The prestige and fame attached to membership in this set of cultural elites conjured a sometimes off-putting, sometimes downright offensive feedback loop of self-regard. The most nauseating example of this dynamic in Schultz's book is the fifteen or so pages spent on discussing the masked, black-and-white ball thrown by Truman Capote in the fall of 1966. Intended as a thinly disguised celebration of his own critically acclaimed book on the quadruple Clutter family murders, Capote invited anybody and everybody in the literary and political power circles of New York City. And when they all got together, things that happen at parties with a lot of egos throwing their weight around happened. People had a good time, got drunk, and got into awkward confrontations. There is no point in going into more detail than that because honestly, it is not interesting or important.

But Schultz apparently thinks it is, as he spends a good amount of time going into detail of who-said-what-to-whom and what the fallout was. But all I knew is that afterwards I felt like I needed to shower, so palpable was the sensation of being soaked in the self-absorption of people so easily distracted by their own privilege and prestige that they didn't mind rubbing shoulders with war criminals and racists.

We do learn other things from this book. I learned, for example, that Norman Mailer once stabbed his wife in a drunken rage and then told the people who tried to assist her to "let the bitch die."⁸ That was an interesting detail to ponder in an age where domestic violence and sexism aren't so easily excused by a wave of the hand and a "well yes, but his novels are *brilliant*" refrain.

I also learned that Mailer and Buckley so enjoyed each other's company that they once planned to go on a sailing trip together (others would also be present), which alas, Mailer in the end couldn't make.⁹ Mailer acknowledged to his fans that Buckley's public persona involved hurling "unspeakably churlish invective," but personally he was "the best fellow you ever met offstage."¹⁰ And in fact, in some ways the two men's politics converged, with both feeling concerned and confused with the forms of political engagement the younger generations were pioneering. So, by the end of the book, what we do get is a portrait of a friendship rooted in white male solidarity. What we don't get is any clear argument as to why we should care.

For that, we can turn to Rick Perlstein. In 1997, Perlstein was working on *Before the Storm*, his first in a series of three books that feverishly chart the rise of the New Right through Barry Goldwater, Richard Nixon, and Ronald Reagan. Not surprisingly, Buckley was an ideal person to interview, and he agreed. After Buckley's death in 2008, Perlstein contributed to the postmortem commentary on the man by composing a short essay in remembrance of Buckley, titled "Why William F. Buckley Was My Role Model."¹¹

⁸ Schultz, *Buckley and Mailer*, 14–15. He actually stabbed her *twice*, and then kicked her, and she nearly died.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 255–57.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹¹ Rick Perlstein, "Why William F. Buckley Was My Role Model," Feb. 27, 2008, *History News Network* (originally ourfuture.org), <http://hnn.us/article/47815>

What immediately becomes clear is how surprised Perlstein was at the openness of the right-wing legend. As he writes, “I sat with him for a good half hour in *National Review*’s offices on Lexington Avenue in Manhattan, and he answered every damned question I asked, in searching detail, and then answered a few I hadn’t even asked.” Buckley followed up with personal letters and flattering public commentary on Perlstein’s work. Of course, Buckley didn’t agree with Perlstein’s views—how could he, having spent his entire life trying to defeat them—but this clearly didn’t matter to Perlstein. Rather, he was awed that the Great Man deigned to engage with him at all. When Buckley expressed regret at not reading Perlstein’s book earlier, Perlstein was wowed. “What a deeply sensitive, humane thing to say to a 31-year-old first-time author: an apology for not affording him his immediate attention.” It’s a pity that this sensitive, humane man didn’t extend these qualities to the victims of the AIDS epidemic when he quipped that “everyone detected with AIDS should be tattooed in the upper forearm to prevent common needle use, and on the buttocks, to prevent the victimization of homosexuals.”¹² It would have been nice, as well, if he had displayed some of this thoughtfulness to James Baldwin when he debated him at Yale University in 1965, but instead he opened his rebuttal by accusing Baldwin of affecting an English accent.¹³ But Perlstein did not hold these contributions of Buckley to our public discourse against him—because what mattered is how nice Buckley was *to him*. Buckley became his friend, and, as Perlstein explained, “He was friends with those he fought. He fought with friends. These are the highest civic ideals to which an American patriot can aspire.”¹⁴

So finally, we’ve arrived at a substantive argument. Politics, according to this view, should be conducted in a sphere disconnected from the consequences of what we advocate there. Believe that the American military should have been willing to annihilate every last North Vietnamese communist left alive in order to win that war? Or that dissenting scholars should be denied their academic freedom? Or that the

¹² Martin, “William F. Buckley is Dead at 82.”

¹³ Schultz, *Buckley and Mailer*, 126.

¹⁴ Perlstein, “Why William F. Buckley Was My Role Model.”

“white community” should control the South because “it is the advanced race”?¹⁵ None of that should come back on you as long as you are nice to the fellows who write books and think otherwise. (Indeed, the word “nice” makes an appearance in Perlstein’s essay four times.)

This is American patriotism; political debate without any accountability for the real-world results of the ideas or policies we advocate.

As we’ve seen, this conception of patriotism also makes an appearance in Schultz’s book, who highlights the “deep love” both men felt for the country.¹⁶ In the Epilogue, although he avoids being so blunt about it as Perlstein, he again hints at this idea. Schultz emphasizes first, the huge impact both Buckley and Mailer had on American political culture, and second, how much they clearly respected each other. Both arguments are undeniably true, but Schultz—perhaps wisely—never explicitly lays out why we should be impressed by either. The conclusion, rather, is left implicit: *wow!* look at these two giants of American Ideas, having it out on stage but still digging each other behind the scenes. If they could do it, perhaps we could; perhaps we’re not that different after all.¹⁷

A comforting thought in the age of Trump, but also a harder one to sell. And interestingly, both appeared before 2016, when Trump’s triumph threw millions of liberals into an existential crisis and such platitudes about civil debate could still be swallowed by most without a hiccup. And to be fair, there are indications that Perlstein might not write *quite* so glowing a reflection of Buckley today. He has been critical of post-Trump attempts to cast Buckley as some kind of moderate Republican who protected the party from the fringe before Trump single-handedly undid all his good work.¹⁸ Nonetheless, the fantasy of the

¹⁵ Quoted in Joseph Crespino, *Strom Thurmond’s America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 10. Crespino also discussed how Buckley Jr.’s father was a close friend of Thurmond, and sent him a copy of *The National Review* and noted that Jr. “is for segregation and backs it in every issue.”

¹⁶ Schultz, *Buckley and Mailer*, 4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 329–32.

¹⁸ Rick Perlstein and Edward H. Miller, “The John Birch Society Never Left,” *New Republic*, March 8, 2021, <https://newrepublic.com/article/161603/john-birch-society-qanon-trump>. Rick Perlstein, “I Thought I Understood the American Right. Trump Proved Me Wrong,” *New York Times Magazine*, April 11, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/11/magazine/i-thought-i-understood-the-american-right-trump-proved-me-wrong.html>

Habermasian public sphere continues to entrance the majority of the liberal commentariat like a mirage in the middle of the desert.

Some may accuse this review of engaging in purity politics—or cancel culture, if you prefer. Any deviation from a hard left-wing perspective, according to this view, is met with intolerant disdain. A product of self-absorption and ideological blinkers, cancel culture makes a sport out of who is the most woke, and protects the spoils of the victors by shaming, insulting, and ostracizing anyone who disagrees. Certainly, these dynamics can be a problem. But let's stop and remember who we are talking about here. This is *William F. Buckley* we are considering; not your boomer uncle who makes sexist jokes at the dinner table or clearly prefers Phil Michelson over Tiger Woods for reasons other than their relative skills in golfing. While such people may make us uncomfortable, they cannot, in and of themselves, do much harm, nor should they necessarily be held to the high standard of accountability for what they say as a commentator who positions themselves as an authority on political questions.

But when it comes to public figures and, what's more, public figures who *actively make their living from politics in one form or another*, not only is scrutiny and criticism called for, but social accountability. But if we segregate our political from our personal assessments of powerful people, this becomes impossible, and we create an incredibly shallow political culture which denies any connection between our public commitments and their consequences to flesh and bone human beings. Politics becomes framed as a game, and two pundits or politicians shouting at each other on the court of a cable news show can simply shake hands after the cameras are off. Liberals like to think they are exempt from this toxicity because they advocate for polite, “reasoned” discourse; but this is a difference in style, not substance. It does not matter whether political debate resembles a wrestling match or a golf tournament—if, when the contest is over, all antagonism ceases, those who continue to struggle under the rule of the victor can rightly conclude that no one was ever fighting for them in the first place. When there are no serious social consequences for the individuals who create the conditions of oppression and suffering—when civility is constantly prioritized over solidarity—those actively engaged in making life miserable for millions can continue to do so without

a second thought. And this is disastrous; because politics is not, in fact, a game. It is a matter of life and death.

Insisting that our assessments of political actors must or can include dynamics on the personal level obscures this reality by equating subjective experience with the broader public good. This comes across clearly in Perlstein's piece—the most relevant fact about Buckley's character, it seems, is how willing he was to shoot the shit with the ideological enemy. But to further illustrate this point, I offer a confession: I, too, have been charmed by William F. Buckley. As a college student, my politics were quite different from what they are now, and I also had not yet learned how to be skeptical of charisma. So even as I transitioned into liberalism, I couldn't help but like the guy. Even now I can still access these instinctual responses—I understand why people find him compelling. But I've also learned to distinguish between my own engagement with people or ideas and their broader impact on the world. And because I've come to believe that solidarity has to be able to wield social power if it ever hopes to wield political power, I do my best to align my public actions and utterances with what would do the most to help build that solidarity.

So, it doesn't much matter if someone can't help but love William F. Buckley, or Tucker Carlson, or Jonathan Peterson for whatever reason—as long as they keep that to themselves. But *openly* making claims about their goodness or arguing that they are model citizens or asserting that because they are a good friend, or father, or whatever, they therefore should be regarded as “decent”—that is *actively harmful*.¹⁹ It enables a political culture where people can advocate for and enact racist, classist, and sexist policies and then be embraced by the powerful and well-to-do, granting them the authority and ability to continue to do more of the same. Hence Henry Kissinger, one of the most heinous war criminals of the twentieth century, being embraced by Hilary Clinton and dozens more. Hence Dick Cheney, a chief engineer of two disastrous wars and advocate for the imperial presidency suddenly being made into a good guy simply because he finds the way Trump tries to seize power to be distasteful.²⁰ And hence George W. Bush, once the

¹⁹ Perlstein, “Why William F. Buckley Was My Role Model.”

²⁰ (IE, the “unitary executive”) See Martin Lederman commenting on PBS's *Cheney's Law*, 2007, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/cheney/themes/believers.html>

embodiment of everything liberals are supposedly opposed to, being elevated as a loveable model of responsible conservatism.

Buried in the liberal approach to people who, politically, can only be described as villains, is an assumption about how politics works. Once again the Habermasian dream of the public sphere will be conjured to justify their inclusion in polite discourse by arguing that politics is the art of persuasion – or, as Perlstein puts it in his eulogy for Buckley, “the game of politics is to win over American institutions to our way of seeing things.”²¹ Politics, according to this rarefied scheme, is therefore first and foremost a debate—or even just a “conversation.” It takes place in the Realm of Reason, in the mystical Marketplace of Ideas, and to engage with your opponents in a manner that takes into consideration how their arguments impacted actual people is to drag the whole enterprise into the mud. To respond to this fantasy with a reality-based approach that understands that politics is also a social activity—where cultural pressure must be applied to reward and punish those engaged in promoting good or evil—is unacceptable to the liberal mind. You might as well be arguing for Stalinist thought control or the subjugation of the self to the immortal and infallible will of The Party.

Liberals defend this slippery slope logic by insisting that all that is needed to defeat bad ideas are, well, good ones. Schultz again furnishes us with an example of this reasoning when he devotes an entire chapter of his book to the famous 1965 debate between William F. Buckley and James Baldwin. Interestingly, Schultz does not hold back in his assessment of Buckley’s performance—his arguments are rightly described as “vile” and “little more than disguised racism.”²² And the students at Cambridge agreed, as the audience voted Baldwin the victor by a count of 544 to 164. Schultz goes on to discuss how Buckley completely failed to grasp why his animosity to the civil rights movement was so horrid, only slightly modifying his views on the necessity of federal intervention to end segregation by 2004.²³

²¹ Perlstein, “Why William F. Buckley Was My Role Model.”

²² Kevin M. Schultz, “William F. Buckley and *National Review*’s Vile Race Stance: Everything You Need to Know about Conservatives and Civil Rights,” *Salon*, June 7, 2015, https://www.salon.com/2015/06/07/william_f_buckley_and_national_reviews_vile_race_stance_everything_you_need_to_know_about_conservatives_and_civil_rights/. This article was excerpted from the book.

²³ Schultz, *Buckley and Mailer*, 136.

But what is left out of this story is how, from the vantage point of the *longue durée*, Buckley did win the debate. Have a majority of Americans (or Britons, for that matter), to this day, really accepted the truth of Baldwin's claim that "the Southern oligarchy which has still today so very much power in Washington, and therefore some power in the world was created by my labor and my sweat and the violation of my women and the murder of my children"?²⁴ Indeed, at the moment of the debate the civil rights movement had in many regards hit its peak, and after the landmark legislation of 1964 and 1965, started to be blocked by the same obstinate refusal of white Americans to actually address entrenched social inequality that it still faces today. I am reminded of Jon Stewart's observation that had he actually "destroyed" the arguments of so many right-wing pundits and politicians, as many a social media headline claimed, the political landscape would look very fucking different.²⁵ Interestingly, *Salon*, which ran an excerpt of Schultz's chapter on the Baldwin-Buckley debate, engages in this exact indulgence, running it with the subtitle: "Remembering the night William F. Buckley took his genteel racism to Cambridge – and left destroyed by James Baldwin."²⁶ Would that it were so.

All of which is not to argue that public debate is useless or that a campaign of egg-throwing will solve all our political deadlock (although honestly, it's not a bad idea). Debate is important, and the truth is powerful. But on its own, it is certainly not enough; political discourse always unfolds in a social matrix of power where truth will be toothless without the bite of at least some sort of substantial repercussions for assisting in the spread of lies. Yet the very existence of Schultz's book and Perlstein's insistence that we should be friendly with our enemies seems to deny this reality or, at least expresses a deep desire to carry on with political and historical thinking as if it wasn't the case. But as should be clear from the number of bodies lying about—those of people denied housing, health care, and basic human dignity – contemporary politics simply isn't that bloodless. This is why it does not matter how generous, kind, or genial William F.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 125.

²⁵ Hilary Lewis, "Jon Stewart Talks Media's Role in Election Outcome, How to Combat Spread of Fake News," *Hollywood Reporter*, Dec. 2, 2016, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/jon-stewart-why-daily-show-didnt-determine-election-trump-fake-news-cnn-fox-at-ny-times-talk-95-952367/>

²⁶ Schultz, "William F. Buckley and *National Review*'s Vile Race Stance."

Buckley was. No man that contributes to a body count that high can ever be considered decent without empowering those who would follow in his footsteps.

FILM REVIEW:
BLACK POLITICAL IDEOLOGY AND IDENTITY: REVIEW OF
ONE NIGHT IN MIAMI

ANDREA Y. SIMPSON
VALERIA SINCLAIR-CHAPMAN

One Night in Miami, now playing on Netflix, is an honest and original look at the ideologies that drove the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. A night of conversation, conflict, and male bonding between Malcolm X (Kingsley Ben Adir), Cassius Clay (Eli Goree), Sam Cooke (Leslie Odom, Jr.), and Jim Brown (Aldis Hodge) illuminate these ideologies. Directed by Regina King, a longtime actor, the film is entertaining while never losing sight of how each of these men shaped Black politics and their space in African Americans' minds and hearts. King is deft at balancing the personalities with the tensions of the time, which is remarkable. This film is her directorial debut of a feature film, and it is an auspicious one.

Kemp Powers, who wrote the script, also penned the stage play. Sometimes stage plays are not readily adaptable to the screen critics noted when the film adaptation of *August: Osage County*, where what was riveting drama on stage became almost a parody and the actors, most of these actors luminaries in the art, turned in "over-the-top" performances (Green et al., 2020). *One Night in Miami* avoids these traps and leaves us satisfied by a glimpse into the lives of these men who were at once larger than life and complicated, flawed human beings.

Most of the action occurs in a motel room reminiscent of the room at the Lorraine Hotel where Martin Luther King Jr. stayed in Memphis and where he was assassinated. The room itself foreshadows a similar fate for Malcolm X. Muhammed Ali unexpectedly wins a boxing match

against Sonny Liston on February 25, 1964. That night, Malcolm X has planned a party to be attended by Jim Brown, Sam Cook, and Cassius Clay/Muhammed Ali. When the men arrive in Malcolm X's room, there is no party. Malcolm X has other plans. There is not much festive about the atmosphere beyond vanilla ice-cream in the hotel refrigerator. The night evolves into a long, intriguing conversation about competing strategies for achieving black equality and the price each man has paid for success. Under Regina King's skillful direction, the film reveals the bond between men who are trying to carve out spaces for themselves while grappling with their responsibilities to the broader black community. At the same time, they must navigate the troubled waters of a white America that would routinely remind them of their "proper place."

The film opens with Jim Brown visiting a white neighbor in his hometown, St. Simon's Island, the largest barrier island in the Golden Isles. Blacks owned 86 percent of the island postbellum, but inhabitants have had to deal with "island gentrification" as wealthy whites discovered the Golden Isles' beauty over time. Reflecting the steady dwindling of the island's black population, recent figures from the early 2000s show that blacks made up less than one-half of one percent of the total population of slightly more than 13,000 (Johnson, 2002).

As we watch Brown drive his convertible Cadillac along a picturesque road, he arrives at a palatial house. He is greeted with enthusiasm at the door by the owner's granddaughter. Her grandfather seems elated to see Brown, an old family friend and hometown football hero. Brown is warmly welcomed and invited by the grandfather to take a seat and join him for a glass of lemonade. In the backdrop to the scene, the island's incredible beauty is juxtaposed with the condescending way the family friend, a stalwart member of the landed gentry, both embraces Brown and reminds him of his place. The scene establishes what we will see and hear throughout

the rest of the film: beauty tainted by ugliness, victory tainted by jeers, political agency suffocated by surveillance, and artistic brilliance circumscribed by the demands of white gatekeepers.

One Night in Miami uses flashbacks to allow the audience to witness these men as they navigate the unyielding schizophrenia of American racism, the cheers and jeers, the embrace and violence. When Brown, Cooke, and Clay arrive at the hotel, they realize that they are not there for the kind of party they anticipate. As the men negotiate whether to stick around for a celebration without booze or women, a conversation ensues about black life in America. Where they sleep, how they perform and for whom, the decisions they make about their professional and personal lives, are all complicated by how they see their own roles as leaders in the black community. Malcolm is hopeful that the conversion to Islam of a beloved black hero will give him the added visibility and leverage he needs to bring converts to the Muslim Mosque, Inc., (MMI), and Organization of African-American Unity (OAAU).

The four men represent four aspects of black political ideology and four kinds of black identity. In the social sciences, we have developed measures of racial identity to explain various orientations of black people to the American polity. Racial identity is measured with questions that probe to what extent individuals believe in the collective fate of all blacks. The most used set of survey questions asks the extent to which what happens to other blacks affects what happens to me, reflecting a measure of “linked fate.” Linked fate is one explanation for overwhelming black support of the Democratic Party, with upwards of 80 percent of black citizens routinely voting for Democratic candidates. Linked fate is also one explanation for why class divisions do not explain the black vote. Growing class stratification in the black community predicts greater support for the Republican Party. Of course, the Republican Party, with its adoption of the Southern Strategy in 1968, ceased credibly competing for black votes long ago.

Adir presents an understated, but remarkable portrayal of Malcolm X, a man with little time left to fulfill his dream of black liberation. Viewers see Malcolm as never before, relaxed but anxious, affable, and angry, but most of all filled with love for humanity. He has accompanied Cassius at several matches, with his camera always nearby, and has taught the pro-fighter the practice of Muslim prayer. On this night in Miami, Cassius is working through his decision to declare his new membership in the Nation of Islam. Malcolm wants Cassius to reveal his decision to Brown and Cooke. Malcolm is interested in black empowerment of a kind that sees the men speak directly to and transform their black audiences without seeking to gain favor from white ones.

Clay is young, very young when he wins the first bout with Sonny Liston. Four years earlier, he had won a gold medal in boxing at the summer Olympics. Just twenty-two years old when he beats Liston, he is developing a political and social consciousness beyond his years. Some think Malcolm X has undue influence over Clay, but as the night progresses, we see glimpses of Black Power ideology in the making. Unlike Cooke, who had his white manager book him a room at a whites-only hotel, Clay is at home lodging at the black-owned motel. He is attracted to the idea of black economic independence, both his own and that of the broader black community. Both the Nation of Islam and Black Power movement leaders shared the position that black liberation required that black people have independent control over their economic fortunes.

Cooke is a seasoned entertainer who is skeptical about Malcolm's motives and the philosophy of the Nation. He represents the integrationist, insisting on lodging where whites of his stature would lodge. Cooke drives a foreign sports car and aspires to be a "crossover" or mainstream entertainer. During the night, Malcolm critiques the romanticism of his music, lamenting the lack of a message for the people. He compares Cooke's songs unfavorably to Bob

Dylan's song, "Blowin' in the Wind," which was prophetic and political. For Cooke, the criticism stings. The two men nearly come to blows.

Brown is neither an integrationist like Cooke, nor a separatist like Malcolm and Clay. For Brown, the National Football League (NFL) is both a way to demonstrate his superiority and gain the respect of peers, black and white. But, his NFL career is also a reminder of the limited mobility and agency of black men in America. He wants to leave professional football and build an acting career. This move is met with derision from some. For Brown's character, and indeed for the entire film, the genteel plantation owner whose house he stopped by at the opening of the movie symbolizes the way whites commodify the black body. He wants the broader audience that a career in film would provide. He wants to earn more money without risking his health. Brown is clear that he is not a candidate for the Nation of Islam. Their code of conduct is strict—one must be monogamous, with a whole set of dietary restrictions, none of which appeal to Brown.

These four men, all of whom are American icons, are depicted in ways that illuminate their flaws, worries, and desires. In her directorial decisions, King reminds the viewer of the stage play elements of the film. Most of the action takes place in a single room among the four men who laugh, cry, quarrel and commiserate with each other. The emotional depth of the characters is rare in the presentation of black men on the big screen. The film's insights into the evolution of black ideology and identity are subtle and remarkable. For all their achievement, these men have not escaped the indignity and violence of white racism, but each has embarked on a different path toward freedom. Despite regional and professional differences that shape how each responds to their circumstances, they all identify as black men—a fact which Malcolm reminds them of in a quiet, understated, but richly insistent way. Their shared experience as black men is their bond, their love and respect for each other helps them persist through that hot night in Miami. The

characters of these four men show us competing ideas about how black folks can gain freedom for themselves. Will it be through commitment to a common good, as Clay and Malcolm advocate? Or will black liberation be realized through the individual successes of people like Cooke and Brown aspire?

While there is much to applaud about this gem of a film, women are woefully absent except as accessories and afterthoughts. There is little dialogue about women other than when Brown mentions that he expected to find “pussy” at the party. That the absence of women’s presence and agency occurs under the direction of a wonderfully talented Regina King is disappointing; however, we recognize that neither the play, nor the script, can be all things to all people. Although a nod to Black women through a depiction of their influence and presence in these men’s lives might have added depth, Kemp did not include this perspective in his screenplay. Despite this shortcoming, *One Night in Miami* stands out as one of the best films of this year, indeed of any year. It is an original, entertaining, educational, and fascinating snapshot of the lives of four iconic, brave, beautiful, strong, and fragile black men—marvelously depicted under the superlative direction of Regina King and the deft performances of the actors.

FILM REVIEW:
MORE THAN A HISTORICAL NARRATIVE OF ONE OF
AMERICA'S MOST NOTORIOUS TRIALS: REVIEW OF *THE
TRIAL OF THE CHICAGO 7*

YESMINA KHEDIR

Released on September 25, 2020, Aaron Sorkin's *The Trial of the Chicago 7* came out at a critical period of the U.S. contemporary history. With the rising demands for social and racial justice led by the Black Lives Matter movement and the huge demonstrations that swept American streets — and across the world—to denounce police violence and discrimination against people of color following the cold-blooded murder of George Floyd in May 2020, *The Trial of the Chicago 7* is more relevant today than any time since the 1960s. Sorkin himself states in his foreword to *The Trial of the Chicago: An Official Transcript* that “the country’s mood in 2020 is eerily similar to what it was in 1968” (p. xv). By taking us back to the 1960s, Sorkin’s *The Trial of the Chicago 7* aims to reconstruct and revise facts around what happened during one of the most notorious trials in the history of the U.S. courthouse. Indeed, the film moves even beyond the mere historical and legal representation of the Chicago 7 trial to provide a larger social, political, and cultural overview of one of the most tumultuous decades of U.S. history.

Written and directed by Aaron Sorkin, *The Trial of the Chicago 7* is a 130-minute historical legal drama that is based on the true story of the case of the *United States v. Dellinger et al.*, better known as the “Chicago 7,” which started in the fall of 1969 and ended in the winter of 1970, lasting for more than six months. The film portrays the trial of a group of anti-Vietnam war and

counterculture activists who staged a massive revolution during the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. The trial initially included eight defendants: Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin, David Dellinger, Tom Hayden, Rennie Davis, John Froines, Lee Weiner, and Bobby Seale, with William Kunstler as their defense attorney, Richard Schultz as the federal lead prosecutor, and Julius Hoffman as the Judge. The “Chicago 8” became the “Chicago 7” after Judge Hoffman declared a mistrial for Bobby Seale, leaving the scene with seven defendants.

Handpicked by Richard Nixon’s newly designated attorney general John Mitchell, Richard Schultz is appointed to make a case against the eight defendants and charge them with conspiracy to cross state lines in order to incite riots. Though he accepts the mission, Schultz is not utterly convinced they can get an indictment on conspiracy because some of the defendants have never met each other personally prior to the protests. Asked by Mitchell for his own *personal* opinion on the defendants, Schultz replies “I see them as vulgar, anti-establishment, antisocial, and unpragmatic” (1:57:30). He also describes them during the first day of the trial as “the radical Left in different costumes” (1:47:22): The Student for Democratic Society (SDS) represented by Tom Hayden and Rennie Davis, the Youth International Party (Yippies) represented by Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin, and The Black Panther Party, led by Bobby Seale. However, as we may feel, Schultz’s view of the case remains controversial throughout the trial and though he fiercely tries to win, he shows doubts on “who started the riots. Was it the protesters, or the defendants?” (1:57:18). Today, fifty years after the trial, Schultz still firmly believes that the trial was a complete mayhem and that the defendants were given exactly what they wanted: “a stage and an audience” (1:56:59). He describes Sorkin’s movie as “fun to watch—just a fantasy, that’s all” (Rogers, 2020).

Perhaps some of the most remarkable and memorable scenes of the movie are the ones that feature Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin. As nonconformists and counterculturalists, Hoffman and

Rubin contribute to most of the movie's fun parts. Despite the momentousness of the occasion, the two defendants' sarcastic and humorous tactics in addressing Judge Hoffman render the trial rather unexpectedly entertaining. The trial, as shown by the movie, feels indeed more like a black comedy show¹, a political satire that evokes more serious and deeply rooted issues at the heart of American democracy and culture. In a Sorkinese theatrical fashion, the courtroom becomes more like a stage with Hoffman and Rubin, in their funky hippie outfits and un-groomed hairstyles, more like standup comedians mocking the proceedings and pranking on Judge Julius Hoffman and the American criminal justice system. For instance, on one occasion, Hoffman and Rubin appear in courtroom wearing judicial robes (for which they are charged with one count of contempt), and on another one, Abbie Hoffman calls Judge Hoffman "father" (1:48:35) in a religiously scoffing tone, only to add later in a more sarcastic way that contempt of court "is practically a religion for me, Sir" (1:48:27). Actually, in playing, respectively, Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin, Sacha Baron Cohen and Jeremy Strong can only be hailed for their performance and contribution to the movie's successful portrayal of the Yippies' approach and role in the countercultural and revolutionary climate of the 1960s.

Humor aside, the movie abounds also with graphically violent and shocking scenes: flashbacks of the protesters' bloody confrontations with the police, a scene of sexual assault against one of the female protesters, footage of Martin Luther King's and John F. Kennedy's assassinations, and above all the extremely humiliating scene of Bobby Seale with his legs and hands chained and his mouth gagged and tapped in front of everyone in the courtroom. The

¹ This has also been noted by several reviewers. See, for instance, Owen Gleiberman's review of the movie in *Variety*, <https://variety.com/2020/film/reviews/the-trial-of-the-chicago-7-review-aaron-sorkin-sacha-baron-cohen-eddie-redmayne-1234781640/>; or K. Austin Collins's review in *RollingStone*, <https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-reviews/trial-chicago-7-aaron-sorkin-sacha-baron-cohen-review-1074099/>.

sympathetic image of Bobby Seale in the shackles is no more but another familiar dehumanizing “spectacle” that evokes the ongoing systemic violence against Black people. Commenting on Judge Hoffman’s mistreatment of all the defendants, and more particularly of Bobby Seale, William M. Kunstler states in his introduction to the *The Chicago Conspiracy Trial* book, “The judge seldom missed an opportunity to hold up the defendants and/or their attorneys to scorn and ridicule . . . In dramatic impact, however, his treatment of Bobby Seale completely overshadowed his other excesses” (1970, xiv). In addition to publically mortifying Bobby Seale, Judge Hoffman denied him his constitutional right to represent and defend himself in the absence of his lawyer. However, as shown in the movie, Seale certainly exhibited great courage and perseverance in defending himself and denouncing what he describes as “a racist decadent America where the Government of the United States does not recognize the black man’s constitutional rights, and have never recognized them” (quoted in Kunstler 1970, xv). As the National Chairman of the Black Panther Party, Seale does not believe in non-violent resistance and rather advocates militant self-defense. So, when one of his friends mentions the name of Dr. King, Seale replies “King is dead. He has a dream? Well now he has a fucking bullet in his head. Martin’s dead, Malcolm’s dead, Medgar’s dead, Bobby’s dead, Jesus is dead. They tried it peacefully? We gon’ try something else” (2:05:16). Bobby Seale’s phrase certainly reveals one of the major ideological differences among the leaders of Black activism in the 1960s as well as the “disenchantment with . . . the partial success of the Civil Rights movement” (Gaál-Szabó 2021, 99–100). Besides Bobby Seale, Sorkin’s movie briefly covers the story of another Black Panther leader, Fred Hampton. And although *The Trial of the Chicago 7* does not go into the details around Hampton’s assassination, it certainly raises questions and sheds light on one of America’s most heinous crimes and attempts at silencing and persecuting Black political activists in the 1960s.

As a script writer, Sorkin insists that “[t]o keep your story compelling and believable, make sure the stakes in the character’s life are high, urgent, and believable” (Olchawska, 2020). And the film does a good job in exploring the inmost motives and the underlying tension between the defendants. And perhaps the most obvious ideological clash in the movie is the one between Abbie Hoffman and Tom Hayden. The two have differing views of the very meaning and appropriate methodology of revolution. While Hoffman believes that a cultural revolution, which involves street demonstrations, music, theatre, performance, sexual liberation, etc., is the most effective way to end the war, dismantle social norms, and bring political and cultural changes, Tom Hayden asserts he has “no time for cultural revolution. It distracts from actual revolution” (1:41:45) and goes further to verbally and physically attack Hoffman and doubt his real desire to end the war. Hoffman, in his turn, also accuses Hayden of taking advantage of the war cause to achieve other personal political goals. Despite the obvious competing visions of the defendants, the movie features as well other moments of solidarity among them. For instance, Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin led the march to free and bail out Tom Hayden after being arrested for deflating the tire of a police car. Also, as a gesture of opposition to Judge Hoffman’s discriminatory behavior and public humiliation of Bobby Seale, the defendants refused to stand up for Judge Hoffman when he adjourned the session—except for Tom Hayden who first stood up but then sat down hesitantly explaining later that his behavior was just “a mistake, a reflex” (46:37). Furthermore, Abbie Hoffman’s view of Tom Hayden changes radically by the end of the trial as he finally comes to see him as a “badass of an American patriot” (18:51).

We cannot talk about Sorkin's *The Trial of the Chicago 7* without pointing to the almost complete absence of women². The movie's all-male ensemble cast leaves little space for highlighting the important role that women played in the antiwar and civil rights movements of the 1960s. Indeed, the very few occasions where we see female figures are scenes of women that are being either verbally and physically sexually assaulted (the attempted rape of one of the female protesters and the sexual harassment over the phone of the "conspiracy office" female employee) or excluded from decision-making (the young female juror who is removed from the trial allegedly for receiving a threatening letter from the Black Panthers, but most probably for being seen holding a James Baldwin book). However, whether the absence of women reflects a failure of the movie in giving credit to women's activism and contribution in the civil rights struggle or is due to the very nature of the story, it certainly tells something about the sexist and anti-feminist political and cultural climate of the 1960s and before.

Sorkin's *The Trial of the Chicago 7* triggered both positive and negative reactions. While the movie has been criticized by some reviewers and critics for its occasional lack of historical accurateness, its unfaithfulness to the trial's official transcript, and its exaggeration of the conflictual relationship between the defendants³, it remains first and foremost a creative work of art which has its own aesthetic take and approach of the story. *The Trial of the Chicago 7* is indeed more than a historical narrative of one of the most infamous trials in U.S. history or of the complex cultural and political swings of the famous 1960s but rather a reminder that change comes only with resistance and a call for continued action for social and economic justices in a time of serious

² The film's complete erasure of the role of women in the antiwar movement has been highlighted by Judi Gambo, 1960s counterculture activist and member of the Yippies. For more details see, <https://www.berkeleyside.com/2020/10/28/berkeley-antiwar-organizers-trial-of-the-chicago-7-aaron-sorkin-netflix>.

³ For more details on the film's shortcomings, see Frances Dinkelspiel's article on *Berkeleyside*, <https://www.berkeleyside.com/2020/10/28/berkeley-antiwar-organizers-trial-of-the-chicago-7-aaron-sorkin-netflix>

global challenges. No wonder the movie has earned several Oscar nominations, including Best Picture, Best Supporting Actor, and Best Original Screenplay.

FILM REVIEW:
ART, THE STATE, AND CIVIL RIGHTS: REVIEW OF *THE
UNITED STATES VS. BILLIE HOLIDAY*

JUANITA CRIDER

Released in February 2021 and available via streaming on Hulu, *The United States vs. Billie Holiday* is directed by Lee Daniels and the screenplay is written by playwright Suzan-Lori Parks. Parks developed her screen play from the book *Chasing the Scream: The First and the Last Days of the War on Drugs* by Johann Hari. *The United States vs. Billie Holiday* is marketed as a biographical film, but viewers may be slightly disappointed because it centers on the last ten years of Holiday's life and career. However, there are references to her childhood and earlier life interspersed throughout the film, in somewhat fragmented vignettes, that attempt to offer insight on Holiday's emotional turmoil and often-tragic life choices. This movie plays more like a memoir which traditionally usually focuses on specific moments and periods of a life, for example, personal experience, intimacy, and emotional truth. The narrative of the last years of Holiday's life are filled with an abundance of opportunity to view her through the above lenses.

Holiday is portrayed by Andra Day. Day is an experienced jazz and blues singer and gives a superb performance that captures the pain, angst, turmoil, of Holiday's life and passionate performances. Her embodiment of Billie Holiday earned her a 2020 Golden Globe for Best Actress in a Motion Picture and an Academy Award nomination for Best Actress. Although Holiday is the main protagonist, I argue that the song "Strange Fruit" is almost an equal lead character, and because of the song's role in Holiday's career this automatically positions the U.S. government,

or more specifically, the Federal Bureau of Narcotics surveillance program as a supporting protagonist.

“Strange Fruit” began as a poem written in 1939 by the Jewish American Abel Meeropol. Meeropol was a high school teacher going by the name of Lewis Allan. Donald Clarke, writing in *Wishing on the Moon; The Life and Times of Billie Holiday*, describes the song as “the pivotal vehicle of Billie’s career” (p. 174). It is important to note, as Clarke reminds readers, that in 1939 it was very difficult to know the exact number of Blacks who were lynched in the South. Lynchings were most often not reported as crimes or, if they were, they were underreported and not taken seriously by local southern law enforcement who unfortunately were frequent participants in condoning the violence (p. 177). During the same period the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was actively pursuing an anti-lynching campaign which called for federal legislation and covered prominently in African American newspapers across the country. The song came to Holiday via Barney Josephson. Josephson was the founder of Café Society where Holiday would first perform Strange Fruit. Located in Greenwich, New York, Café Society was one of the only clubs with integrated audiences. Allan had put the song to music and Josephson shared it with the café production manager (p. 174). As portrayed in the movie Holiday was a regular performer at Café Society, and the production manager immediately believed the song was for her. Initially Holiday seemed to be ambivalent about the song. Clarke writes Holiday was said to respond to the song by saying “‘If you think it’s okay, man, I’ll do it.’ ... I don’t think she felt the song [at first] but there came a time when I knew she did. When Allan played it for her, she just listened. Billie was very quick on learning lyrics ... but the time this was, it was the night she sang it and tears came (p. 175). The film captures this moment and similar

moments very well. Once Holiday was captured by the song herself, the staging of the song became very deliberate. The film captures this intentionality extremely well.

*Southern trees bear a strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black bodies swaying in the Southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.
Pastoral scene of the gallant South,
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh,
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.
Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck,
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop,
Here is a strange and bitter fruit.*

The film's story unfolds via flashback opening in 1957 with Holiday being interviewed by Reginald Lord Devine, played by Leslie Jordan. Devine when questioning her about the song he refers to the song as a "lyrically horrifying description of lynching." By the time of this interview Holiday has already been to prison, arrested multiple times, and has battled drug addiction for many years. The film's use of flashback is somewhat clumsy in that the gaps of returning to the interview are virtually long enough to forget that this is the device the film employs to share the story. However, in these gaps the film excels in telling the story of how Holiday was harassed by the Federal Bureau of Narcotics and how the bureau's department head seemingly made it his personal vendetta to destroy Holiday's career. Writing in a 2015 article for *Politico*, "The Hunting of Billie Holiday," Johann Hari reveals that Harry Anslinger, the bureau's director, perhaps was driven not only by the narcotics department's failures during prohibition but also by his racist beliefs. For example, Anslinger wrote in internal memos that jazz "sounded, like the jungles in the dead of night. Another memo warned that 'unbelievably ancient indecent rites of the East Indies are resurrected' in this black man's music. The lives of the jazzmen, he said, reek of filth" (Hari,

“The Hunting”). A perusal of the digitized files available from the Federal Bureau investigation supports the film’s focus on how Anslinger used narcotics and race, encouraging the men in Holiday’s life to betray her to the feds. These documents also support the relationship between Anslinger and the few African American agents hired by the bureau, as portrayed in the character of Jimmy Fletcher. There is debate as to whether Fletcher and Holiday had an intimate relationship as portrayed in the film. However, the available scholarship and primary materials suggest that Fletcher did regret his role in the bureau being used against Holiday.

The film’s focus on the specific period of approximately the last ten years of Holiday’s life provide an insight into what Daphne Brooks writes about in her recent book, *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound*. Brooks argues that “women artists like Holiday who are familiar with white supremacist violence often disassembled it through sound” (p. 183). Despite the film’s portrayal of Holiday’s childhood and adolescent years being disjointed in an attempt to explain her interiority, the work encourages viewers to consider Billie Holiday’s place in the continuum of Black feminist sonic sound, or as Brooks labels it, “the complexities of Black sonic womanhood as civic activism (p. 106).

Even through its shortcomings I highly recommend viewing the film. As a young African American girl growing up in Baltimore, Maryland, Billie Holiday, born Eleanora Fagan, was part of school curriculum when studying local history. Some sources state Holiday was born in Philadelphia, while others name Baltimore as her birthplace. However, it is without argument that Holiday spent much of her early youth in Baltimore where her mother had once lived. This film moved me to think beyond the most common facts known about Holiday and view her as a woman whose life was plagued by poverty and family instability and devoid of tenderness who self-

medicated her pain with drugs and alcohol. I find myself returning to one of Holiday's songs featured in the film, as perhaps semi-autobiographical, written by Duke Ellington: "Solitude."

*In my solitude
You haunt me
With dreadful ease
Of days gone by
In my solitude
You taunt me
With memories
That never die
I sit in my chair
And filled with despair*

*There's no one could be so sad
With gloom everywhere
I sit and I stare
I know that I'll soon go mad
In my solitude
I'm afraid
Dear Lord above
Send back my love
I sit in my chair
Filled with despair
There's no one, no one
No one could be so sad
With gloom everywhere
I sit and I stare
I know that I'll soon go mad
In my solitude
I'm afraid
Dear Lord above
Send back my love*

FILM REVIEW:
A BADGE IS SCARIER THAN A GUN: REVIEW OF *JUDAS AND
THE BLACK MESSIAH*

MARK LATTA

More than one review has referred to *Judas* as a biopic of Fred Hampton. While the movie incorporates biographical elements from Hampton's short adult life and murder, it seems to me a mistake to classify *Judas and the Black Messiah* as a biography. While centered on Hampton and O'Neil, the movie is really an examination of two long-playing historical themes: power and betrayal. The biblical references within the title and early scenes with a sickly-looking J. Edgar Hoover (played by Martin Sheen) set the viewer up to understand a story nearly as old as time: betrayal between two individuals, indeed, but also the treachery of some against their own communities and cultural and economic interests, and the use of betrayal by a supposedly democratic government as a weapon and tool to maintain its power.

Judas excels in telling the interpersonal and cultural story of betrayal and the doomed quest for economic and social power in many ways. The acting, directing, dialogue, story framing, cinematography—everything works well together, and Shaka King should be commended for such a strong film and deliberate screenplay. Likewise, Daniel Kaluuya's performance as Hampton and Lakieth Stanfield's delivery of William O'Neal were both brilliant. If this review were focused narrowly on the movie, it would be tempting to briefly state, "*Judas and the Black Messiah* should be on your watchlist because this is an excellent movie and has been nominated for buckets of awards for very credible reasons," and be done.

It's also important to point out that *Judas and the Black Messiah*, made and manifested by a host of excellent Black talent, is itself a testament to the necessity and cultural power of Black talent. Feeling as if it is necessary to point this out speaks to the ways anti-Black racism continues to drive the larger narrative of filmmaking and culture work.

But—there’s also something very unsettling about *Judas and the Black Messiah* in the way that it focuses predominately upon the betrayal of Hampton (and the Illinois chapter of the Black Panther Party) by O’Neal. There was also something unsettling about watching a dramatized narrative (albeit one that adheres impressively to historical accuracy) of Hampton’s assassination and the targeted dismantling of the Black Panther Party by the U.S. government. After watching the movie a few times, I found myself wondering why King and the Lucas brothers preferred to focus narrowly through the lens of Hampton’s and O’Neal’s interpersonal relationships rather more concretely on what could be understood as a political and social examination on the use of modern-day lynching techniques and dictatorial brutality of the U.S. government. While Hampton’s betrayal was and is infuriating, O’Neal’s storyline was just one manipulation among many taken by the United States to silence opposition. The illegal campaign of assassinations and discord directed by the United States toward the Black Panther Party (and other anti-imperialist groups) played out largely in the background, leaving it up to the viewer to unravel this complex and conspiratorial injustice.

The appeal and allure of narrative as an explanatory device make it a powerful tool. However, telling a story a certain way also eliminates other tellings from becoming objects of examination unless they are taken up later in a different story. This is what I found unsettling about *Judas*. Even as it worked skillfully as cinema, the larger social and political forces of anti-Black racism, internal imperialism, and settler colonialism were too easy to situate as narrative devices and therefore easy to overlook as the immediate threats to humanity they were and continue to be today. The same forces that want to direct our attention away from the sociopolitical reality that Fred Hampton (and so many others) was murdered by a government bent on coalescing around white supremacy seem related to the desire to view this movie as a personal biopic or interpersonal drama rather than a social commentary.

Although made with the blessing of the Hampton family, part of me wonders if this is the movie that Fred Hampton would have wanted. *Judas* centers the individual when Hampton centered people. *Judas* navigates interpersonal strife and O’Neal’s inner turmoil when Hampton navigated social structures of oppression. There are moments when the movie falls victim to the American tendency to focus on individual

players and mythologize people while ignoring the community and collective actions. Hampton's devotion to Marxism—essential to understanding his and The Black Panther philosophy—remain underexplored through *Judas and the Black Messiah*, playing out largely in flashes during montages and when Kaluuya delivers admittedly impressive performances of Hampton's oratory abilities. The formation of the Rainbow Coalition and the commitment to collectivism also seemed diminished by portraying them as aspects of Hampton's personality rather than the learned practice of community organizing. Hampton's class-based Marxist political philosophy was one of the reasons he was such an effective organizer and credible threat to top-down power structures. The near-omission of Marxism seems, at best, a missed opportunity for *Judas* to inspire current and future social leaders in the same way Hampton himself has.

Ironically, this mythology of personality was what sealed Hampton's fate when Hoover and the FBI created the "Black Messiah" while ignoring the social conditions that animated a movement. The Black Panthers and others, as well as overlooking and downplaying the collective responses to these conditions. It was the FBI that insisted on seeing the Black Panthers as a collection of individual identities to be dealt with on a case-by-case basis. Focusing on individual identities rather than the movement is a technique in denying the legitimacy of collectivism and is also something for which the device of narrative is particularly well suited. *Judas and the Black Messiah* does well in telling an abbreviated story of Fred Hampton's rise and untimely fall. Still, there were many moments in which I wondered if a dramatized retelling of one individual was keeping our attention away from the critical questions about a world that necessitates the Black Panther Party or shrugs when visionary and collective responses to injustice are silenced.

If we tell the story of Fred Hampton—but leave out how Hampton thought capitalism and white supremacy were the real enemies, two sides of the same coin—have we really told the story of Fred Hampton? If someone walks away from *Judas* thinking the Black Panther Party dissipated and puttered out rather than intentionally disappeared by our government, police, media, and pro-white culture... what has been gained? There are moments of evident criticality and stinging rebukes of a power structure at war with the Black community (O'Neal's confession to Agent Mitchell that he stole with a badge rather than a gun

because “a badge is scarier than a gun” is one), but these moments seem muted. They present through the backdrop.

But, again, Akua Njeri (formerly Deborah Johnson) and Fred Hampton Jr. provided their blessing to King in the creation of *Judas*. This is an important point, and it ultimately leads me to wonder if I—a white reviewer born seven years after Hampton’s murder—have any right to ask for *Judas and the Black Messiah* to do anything other than to tell the story of Fred Hampton that his partner and son wanted to be told. Probably not. It is also worth pointing out that many of the more critical aspects about Judas mentioned in this review have been examined thoroughly through other documentaries, books, and projects. And it’s not as if the predominantly white audience took to the streets and tossed out politicians in response to the volume of work that illustrates the degree to which the U.S. government conspired with cultural institutions and manipulated its population to decimate the Black community.

Telling a story one way requires choices to be made and excludes other ways of telling the story to take shape. Shaka King, likely taking note of many others who have attempted to point out the brazen illegality of the U.S. government in its treatment of the Black Panthers and the jarring silence from America’s white citizenry, opted to craft a well-told story about O’ Neal and Hampton. They were perhaps our Judas and Black Messiah. In doing so, he’s gained the attention of a still-too-often-silent white constituency. While *Judas and the Black Messiah* is not the source of record for Hampton and the Illinois chapter of the Black Panthers, it was not meant to be. For those who mourned Hampton’s betrayal and death through *Judas and the Black Messiah*, let’s hope that we use this moment to remember the larger struggle to which Hampton gave his life.

***The Peacemaker's Path: Multifaith Reflections to Deepen Your Spirituality* by Jerry Zehr
(Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2021). 201 pages. \$18.99, hardcover.**

Reviewed by Charles Wiles

Jerry Zehr's new book *The Peacemakers Path: Multifaith Reflections to Deepen Your Spirituality*, published by Broadleaf Books in 2021, is a treasure chest filled with pearls of wisdom that have the power to broaden the consciousness of anyone who is open to reading, reflecting, and putting thought into action. Reverend Zehr has created a manual that provides forty-eight daily religious texts to read and consider. The book offers commentary on each text, questions to reflect on, and examples of putting thought into practice. The daily readings originate from all corners of the globe and from many faith traditions. In the book, you will find sacred text from Baha'i, Jewish, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, Jain, and Zoroastrian origins. The collection of texts in *The Peacemakers Path* represents over three millennia of human endeavor to explain the cosmos and our place in it, and as the title implies, offers us a guide to help expand our consciousness and lead us to a deeper spirituality.

The book is divided into six themes: Walking the Enlightened Path, The Power of Prayer, Loving Yourself, Loving Others, Actions and Impact, and Quest for Peace. Along with a cornucopia of modern and ancient religious text, *The Peacemakers Path* includes prayers from local faith and community leaders, and examples on how these themes have inspired others to action, making positive change in our community and in our world. In one example, Reverend Zehr points to a collaboration of community leaders from diverse faith backgrounds who came together to support a local Muslim community that was petitioning to build a new mosque. The petition for a building permit faced vocal and organized opposition. After two public hearings, the petitioners prevailed, and the permit to build the mosque narrowly passed through the ordinance

committee. It is an inspiring story of solidarity from people across faith lines working together to defend religious diversity and the value of pluralism which represents the foundation of the American story.

The Peacemakers Path is an education. You will learn about faith traditions that you may never have heard of, and you will grow to appreciate the religious diversity that exists across the country and in our own backyard. The challenge before us, is to recognize that many of the same faith traditions referenced in the book are also a threat to an inclusive society. A threat by claiming exclusive access to divine guidance and the insidious effort to use political and military power to impose that belief onto others. We have always lived in difficult and challenging times. Following *The Peacemakers Path* does not guarantee a peaceful existence. Many of the amazing quotations and examples of bravery in the book will attest to that. The shadow reality presenting by the beautiful and glowing example of *The Peacemakers Path* is that we must be vigilant in supporting freedom of religious expression and recognizing that most of that work must focus internally on the traditions we claim to follow.

The question brought to us through a Cherokee elder is as relevant today as ever. It describes the feeling of having a battle between two wolves within each of us. One wolf demands attention, is jealous, insecure, and unyielding in anger. The other wolf is gentle, humble, steadfast, patient, and nurturing. When a grandson asked the elder which wolf won the battle, the grandfather explained—the one that we feed.

The Peacemakers Path provides an incredible smorgasbord of human wisdom, intelligence, and goodwill. We are indebted to Reverend Jerry Zehr for his diligent work of bringing this wisdom together in a thoughtful, accessible, and challenging book.

***The Good Hand: A Memoir of Work, Brotherhood, and Transformation in an American Boomtown* by Michael Patrick F. Smith (New York: Viking, 2021). 458 pages. \$18.00 paperback.**

Reviewed by John Lepley

“We need to be *bad motherfuckers* because the alternative is fear, and fear fucks up” (p. 405, emphasis in original). Michael Patrick F. Smith had good reason to be afraid. In 2011, two years before he began working as a “swamper” in an oil patch in North Dakota, 138 oil field workers died on the job in the United States. It doesn’t help that one of his coworkers, the appropriately nicknamed “Wildebeest,” subjects him to mental cruelty on a regular basis. Smith faces other occupational hazards besides verbal taunting and machinery that could crush him in a split-second. Alcohol, isolation, and testosterone endanger Smith and his workmates as much as the equipment they erect and disassemble across the Bakken Shale. *The Good Hand* is Smith’s memoir of exhausting work in an unforgiving climate.

Thousands of people flocked to North Dakota as an oil boom promised a respite from the financial crisis and recession of the late 2000s that continued into the 2010s. Although he had a steady job in New York City, Smith felt other reasons to go to the Great Plains. The dirty, physical labor of cleaning up from Superstorm Sandy in 2012 satisfies him unlike his office job. Ironically, Smith is conscientious about the role of fossil fuels in climate change, but that doesn’t deter him from venturing west to stake his claim in the fracking bonanza. Like Theodore Roosevelt—whom Smith discusses—the Strenuous Life beckons him. “Standing in the backyard of the flophouse, a day shy of starting work as an oil field hand, I know somewhere deep inside myself that I want to get my ass kicked,” he explains (p. 115). This is the *Brotherhood* part of the subtitle: Smith getting his ass whooped by tough manual labor and bonding with men in bars in Williston, North Dakota, over booze and stories of how their fathers abused them.

Corny self-reflection is a common pitfall of memoirs. Smith veers into this territory when he describes himself becoming aware of the physical and mental transformation the work is doing to him: “I feel big, powerful, and resolved. I’m finding my place here” (p. 299). Reading against these tropes, though, *The Good Hand* offers a stark portrait of the material aspects of the fracking boom. Williston simply did not have enough housing to accommodate all the people who flocked there. Rents skyrocketed and landlords squeezed too many people into small spaces. Some of the most affecting parts of this memoir are Smith’s descriptions of his living companions and conditions. At one point, he shares the living room of a small condo with four other men (in addition to several people who live in the condo’s other rooms): “Life in the flop is how I imagine jail must be on work release. It’s all about killing time, watching TV, maybe reading, trying not to let the other guys get on your nerves too bad” (p. 160).

The people that Smith meets in Williston are deracinated and on the edge of destitution. Their experiences recall the “hard living/settled living” binary that Joseph T. Howell describes in *Hard Living on Clay Street*, and most of them live hard.¹ Some of his coworkers served time. For example, Erwin “Jack” Jackson worked in the oil patch with Smith for a while and was then arrested for a parole violation in Washington State. He later reappears in Williston selling marijuana. Another coworker, a Native American, nicknamed “Porkchop,” sports gang tattoos and has teeth that were sharpened with a file. Smith does not romanticize their backgrounds. “Arguably, they are drawn from the bottom of society’s totem pole,” he writes. Smith has an advantage over them since he has a small savings account to cover expenses, and friends that loan him money for an expensive rental deposit, but he is hardly secure.

¹ Joseph T. Howell, *Hard Living on Clay Street: Portraits of Blue-Collar Families* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1973), 6–7.

Smith's class awareness has its limits, too. Even if the heavy labor has salutary effects on his physique and sense of self, the workdays are long, weekends off rare, and his employer is cheap; on a job that requires overnight travel, it doesn't provide per diem or holiday pay. In one instance, Smith's boss and his peers confront him over the accusation that he's "a Democrat" and voted for Barack Obama. However, apart from this political spat Smith's encounters with management are infrequent and generally benign. In short, the transformation he seeks is based in the workplace, but he does not try to transform the workplace.

The Good Hand is an enjoyable read. The chapters are short and episodic, and Smith is a compassionate writer. His coworkers' casual racism angers him, and he is aware of the gendered violence in the oil boomtown. This memoir also offers a sincere picture of Smith's friendship with his work buddy, Huck, a sweet-natured giant whose self-destructive behavior frequently lands him in trouble, and later kills him when he chases liquor with opiates. *The Good Hand* is at its best when Smith's interactions with coworkers and friends reveal his thoughts and feelings.

CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

Robin Marie Averbeck teaches history at CSU Chico and has a PhD from UC Davis. Her book, *Liberalism Is Not Enough*, was published in 2018. She is also an activist and the Membership & Organizing Chair for the CFA chapter in Chico. Her interests include leftist and liberal intellectual history, modern Ireland, and pagan Europe. She is currently working on a book project consisting of a compilation of essays critiquing contemporary American liberalism.

Betty J. Bruther (she/her) is an independent historian. She received her degrees from Indiana University (Bloomington) and the University of Notre Dame in history. She taught history and geography as an adjunct at the University of Indianapolis, Marian University Indianapolis, and Oakland City University via the Indiana Women's Prison. Her major interests are terrorism, paramilitarism, the ideologies behind them, medieval European and East Asian history, the history of serial murder, and the history of film.

Nancy Cook is a writer and teaching artist currently living in St. Paul. She serves as flash fiction editor for *Kallisto Gaia Press* and also runs “The Witness Project,” a program of free community writing workshops in Minneapolis designed to enable creative work by underrepresented voices. Twice nominated for a Pushcart Prize, she has been awarded grants from the Minnesota State Arts Board, the National Parks Arts Foundation, the Mayo Clinic, Minnesota Humanities Center, and Integrity Arts and Culture. In 2019 she served as International Artist in Residence at Artsland, County Tyrone, in Northern Ireland, and has also held residencies at Gettysburg, Harpers Ferry, Kingsbrae Gardens, and at the former Fergus Falls State Hospital in western Minnesota. She is particularly interested in exploring the intersections of geography, history, and cultural heritage in her work. More about her can be found at NancyLCook.com.

Juanita Crider serves as program advisor of the Purdue University Black Cultural Center. She is also currently a PhD candidate in American Studies and an instructor in WGSS at Purdue University with a research concentration in Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies and African American Studies. Her dissertation is tentatively titled, “Coming of age Again: Menopausal Black Women and Black Feminist Reawakening in Literature, Film, Television and New Media.” This project explores how Black women theorize menopause. Her research explores whether Black menopausal women use Black feminist methods and strategies to address and construct the realities of aging. Crider asserts that these women do so, even though many fail to identify as feminists. Additionally, she argues that considering Black women in cultural gerontology scholarship provides opportunities to connect to larger theoretical and interdisciplinary

correlations between fields. Therefore, her dissertation aims to address this gap and encourage Black feminist scholars to consider how their research might be more inclusive of eldering Black women.

Susan Curtis taught History and American Studies at Purdue University from 1989 to 2019. She is the author of four books, *A Consuming Faith: The Social Gospel and Modern American Culture* (1991); *Dancing to a Black Man's Tune: A Life of Scott Joplin* (1994); *The First Black Actors on the Great White Way* (1998), and *Colored Memories: A Biographer's Quest for the Elusive Lester A. Walton* (2008). As a resident of West Lafayette, Susan became involved in the effort to rescue and restore the Morris one-room schoolhouse; she served on the city's Historic Preservation Commission and on the Library Board. She is now retired in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where she is working on a project to connect her family history to larger trends in US and European history.

Ilona Hegedûs is a Hungarian poet, writer, and book reviewer. She graduated from Eötvös Lóránd University (ELTE) in Budapest with a degree in English, where she was also educated as a literary translator. Her first poems were published in 2004. Since then, she has had poems published in the US, UK, France, Greece, and Hungary. At first, she was interested mainly in speculative poetry as an author, then she gradually turned towards the topics of everyday life. She also likes to write pieces for themed anthologies. Examples include poems about wolves, the night sky, the history of mankind, empathy in art and even a poem about coffee. She also completed a master's program in European Studies. She is an avid reader of news from the CEE region and beyond.

Iridessence /Essence Walker is a model, and self-portrait and performance artist based in New Orleans, Louisiana. Her work often features vintage, theatrical, and historical themes and marries them to radical self-love in a socio-political scape that marginalizes people of size and color. She is the inaugural and 2022 "Artist in Residence" for the *North Meridian Review*.

Yesmina Khedhir is currently a Ph.D. candidate at the Doctoral School of Literary and Cultural Studies, University of Debrecen, Hungary. She holds a B.A and MA in English from the Faculty of Letters, Arts, and Humanities Manouba, Tunisia, and was a former Fulbright foreign language teaching assistant at Stanford University (2011-2012). Yesmina's research project focuses on studying the multiple aspects of cultural memory and trauma in Jesmyn Ward's fiction. She has published several articles related to her field of study in international academic journals and conference proceedings. Her academic interests include, but are not limited to, African American literature, culture, and history, trauma and memory studies, ecocriticism, ecowomanism, and Black feminism.

Mark Latta is an assistant professor of English and Director of Community Engaged Learning at Marian University. His research and teaching interests focus on the intersections between community engagement, social change, and the ways literacy is used to resist oppression and enact futures. Latta gained his first experience teaching through an AmeriCorps term of service at Pendleton Juvenile Correctional Facility and remains involved in carceral education as a faculty member of the Women’s College Partnership. Latta directs the Flanner Community Writing Center and has been involved in numerous social arts projects such as “CityWrite,” an Indianapolis project that has collected the personal stories of over 1,100 people since 2012; “the Indy East Art Peace project,” an arts-based response to community violence through peacebuilding; “I Am East 10th Street,” a public art memoir installation relating the stories of those who live and work along east 10th Street; and “Moving Stories,” an examination of the influence of public narratives on public transportation and transit policy. He currently directs Poetic Justice, a peacebuilding and crime prevention project integrating poetry, creative writing, and asset-based community development.

John Lepley is a labor educator in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. From 2006-2008 he was a recipient of the Gertrude and Theodore Debs Memorial Fellowship in the graduate program in labor and social reform movement history at Indiana State University in Terre Haute, Indiana.

David Milley has written and published since the 1970s, while working as a technical writer and web applications developer. His work has appeared in *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Bay Windows*, *RFD*, *Friends Journal*, and *Feral*. Retired now, David lives in southern New Jersey with his husband and partner of forty-six years, Warren Davy, who's made his living as a farmer, woodcutter, nurseryman, auctioneer, beekeeper, and cook. These days, Warren tends his garden and keeps honeybees. David walks and writes.

Doug Morris holds a PhD from Penn State University where he studied with Henry Giroux and Pat Shannon. He currently teaches at West Chester University in Pennsylvania. He has written for *Z Magazine*, *Counterpunch*, *Dissident Voice*, and *Common Dreams*. A former jazz guitarist who now focuses on folk singing and composing/performing “people’s songs,” his research concerns the horrors of capitalism and the needs to replace it. He is also interested in climate disaster, cinema as a form of public pedagogy, Cuba’s struggle for a people first system of economics, the culture of U.S. militarism, peace and social justice, and struggles for a meaningful democracy.

Ricardo Quintana-Vallejo (PhD Purdue University) is an Assistant Professor of English at Rhode Island College. He is the author of *Children of Globalization: Diasporic Coming-of-Age Novels in Germany, England, and the United States*, published by Routledge in 2021. His research explores contemporary

diasporas and global migration in coming-of-age novels and other narratives of youth development. He has been a Fulbright, Lynn, and North Star Collective Fellow. He can be reached at rquintanavallejo@ric.edu.

Dr. Julia Schmidt-Pirro received her PhD in Musicology from the Technische Universität Berlin, Germany, in 1999 under the guidance of Prof. Helga de la Motte-Haber. She has taught courses at Georgia Southern University & Armstrong Atlantic State University, including the Honors Class, “Music and Politics.” She has published a book and several articles on European and American Avant-garde composers, including George Antheil, John Cage, and Mayako Kubo. Her co-authored article, “Employing Music in the Cause of Social Justice: Ruth Crawford and Zilphia Horton,” was selected by the editors of *Voices: The Journal of New York Folklore* for republication in the edited volume, *New York State Folklife Reader: Diverse Voices* (2013). Her most recent publication “Bringing Spirituals onto the Classical Music Stage in the Service of African American Civil Rights” appeared in *Political Messaging in Music and Entertainment Spaces Across the Globe* (Vol. 1), Vernon Press, 2022.

Timothy Sheard is a veteran nurse, a writer, and a lifelong labor and social justice activist. After publishing eleven novels and over fifty short stories, he founded *Hard Ball & Little Heroes Press* in order to bring grownups, children, parents and educators’ stories that engage the reader in the most important issues of their lives: immigrant and labor rights, gender equality, the climate crisis and the value of sharing and caring for others. During the two-year Covid lockdown, Timothy attended virtual music lessons with a teacher in New Orleans. From those lessons and his love for theatre he wrote the book, lyrics and music for his first musical *Listen to the Wind*, which he hopes to see performed one day. In the meantime, he continues to mentor and publish working class writers.

Andrea Y. Simpson is an associate professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Richmond. Simpson has expertise in the politics of race, environmental justice, intersectionality, and social movements. “The Race, Ethnicity, and Politics” section of the *American Political Science Association* named her first book, *The Tie that Binds* (New York University Press, 1998), the “Best Book of 1998 on Racial Identity.” In 2009, the Women’s Caucus of the American Political Science Association awarded her the “Woman of Color Professional Achievement Award.”

Valeria Sinclair-Chapman is a professor of Political Science at Purdue University. She is an Americanist with expertise in legislative politics, minority representation and voting rights, political participation, coalition politics, and social movements. Her research examines the effects of racial, ethnic, and gender diversity on political institutions and engagement. She is the author of an award-winning book, *Countervailing Forces in African American Civic Activism, 1973-1994* (Cambridge University Press,

2006). She currently serves as a co-editor of the *American Political Science Review*, the nation's premiere political science journal and is a founding director of the Institute for Civically Engaged Research (ICER) hosted by Tufts University.

Harry Targ is a Professor Emeritus of Political Science Emeritus at Purdue University. He taught on US/Latin American relations, international political economy, and topics on labor studies in the Department of Political Science and the program in Peace Studies. He has served in the leadership of *The Committees of Correspondence for Democracy and Socialism* (CCDS) for many years and serves also on the steering committee of *Wisconsin Peace Action*. Professor Targ was also a thirty-year member of the *Northwest Central Labor Council* (AFL-CIO). He has published books and articles on foreign policy and international relations and U.S. political economy. He blogs at *Diary of a Heartland Radical* and can be reached at targ@purdue.edu.

Dr. Ellen M. Taylor is a professor of English at the University of Maine at Augusta, where she coordinates language and literature, and regularly teaches in the prison education program. In Maine, she organizes the annual Plunkett Maine Poetry Festival, held each April in Augusta. She is the author of three collections of poetry, *Floating* (2009), *Compass Rose* (2015), and recently, *Homelands* (2022). Taylor has published scholarship on Maine women writers Celia Thaxter, Elizabeth Coatsworth, and Kate Barnes, considering intersections between gender, language, and ecology. She lives in Appleton, Maine.

Charlie Wiles Charlie Wiles holds a degree in Political Science from Indiana University and spent several years working for the Indiana State Legislature. He operated a general contracting business renovating older homes, served as a combat medic in the US Army Reserves, and is the founding director of Peace Learning Center. In 2011, Charlie became the founding director of Center for Interfaith Cooperation (CIC). Charlie is a member of Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic Church, he serves on the Chaplaincy Advisory Board at St. Vincent Hospital and works with several community organizations including “Veterans for Peace,” “Keep Indianapolis Beautiful,” and “OBAT Helpers,” supporting marginalized communities in Bangladesh. Happily married to Sachiko Utsumi Wiles since 1995, they live near Broad Ripple in Indianapolis, Indiana with their three daughters Lena, Aya, and Mia Utsumi Wiles.