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Protest Lyrics at Work: Labor Resistance Poetry of Depression-Era Autoworkers

Rebecca S. Griffin
University of Massachusetts - Amherst

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**PROTEST LYRICS AT WORK: LABOR RESISTANCE POETRY OF
DEPRESSION-ERA AUTOWORKERS**

A Dissertation Presented

by

REBECCA S. GRIFFIN

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

September 2016

English

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REBECCA S. GRIFFIN

Approved as to style and content by:

Ruth Jennison, Chair

Nicholas Bromell, Member

Eve Weinbaum, Member

Jenny Spencer, Chair
English Department

DEDICATION

To Mike

“Rise Above”

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ABSTRACT

PROTEST LYRICS AT WORK: LABOR RESISTANCE POETRY OF DEPRESSION-ERA AUTOWORKERS

SEPTEMBER 2016

REBECCA S. GRIFFIN, B.A., UNIVERSITY OF NEW HAMPSHIRE

M.A., UNIVERSITY OF MAINE

Ph.D., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Ruth Jennison

This dissertation argues that scholarly inquiry into American poetry of the Great Depression is incomplete without a critical understanding of poems produced within the labor movement. Through archival research and methodologies drawn from American studies, gender studies, cultural studies, and labor history, this dissertation demonstrates that autoworkers from 1935-1941 developed a rich poetic discourse that championed their cause. Autoworker poets—including autoworker song lyricists—used humor and borrowed extensively from popular, religious, and “folk” cultures to craft their own poetic styles and trope sets. They wrote about a diverse range of topics from their hopes for the unionization movement, to scab conversions, to comic exaggerations of capitalist figures such as Henry Ford and GM’s William S. Knudsen. Their poems and songs also capture aspects of quotidian life on the shop floor, such as the difficulty of assembly line work, gripes about managers and fellow workers, and frustrations with union factionalization. Women autoworkers and union auxiliary members, similarly, fashioned a discourse that spoke to their own particular set of goals, separate from—yet related to—those of unionizing men. This dissertation, further, shows how parodies of songs and

poems, so often written in the labor movement, were frequently written and rewritten time and time again. Tracing the histories of two parodies, in particular, this study demonstrates 1) how older versions can influence the subtext of newer versions and 2) how mapping geographical appearances of parodies can reveal both evolutions in class consciousness and intersections between aspects of society typically thought to be unrelated. More broadly, discovering the connections between autoworker-authored poems and songs and their wider artistic underpinnings helps us to more deeply understand the array of cultural touchstones that working-class Americans drew upon during a dynamic moment in history.

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INTRODUCTION

In the late 1930s, thousands of American autoworkers found that they had an important role to play in organizing their fellow employees for better working conditions and fair pay. With the passage of the Wagner Act in 1935, which protected workers' rights to organize, and the emergence of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in the years that followed, autoworkers increasingly felt free to join forces without the fear of legal interference or the threat of craft division by the American Federation of Labor (AFL). The union's rise was rapid and dramatic. Between 1936, when the United Automobile Workers (UAW) first began pulling in local unions, and 1937, when the UAW held sit-down strikes that garnered national headlines, union membership grew from roughly 300,000 to some 400,000 workers (Dubofsky and Dulles 276, 282). Fascinatingly, much of the tumult and excitement of the autoworkers' early organizing spirit is captured in the poetry and song lyrics of the era penned by autoworkers themselves.

Even a cursory glance through labor newspapers of the period reveals that autoworkers were hardly alone in their composition of poems. Between 1933 and 1937 alone, some 5 million Americans became new union members (Lichtenstein, *Dangerous* 52), and every type of labor organization—from granite cutters to electrical workers, sailors to teachers, musicians to textile workers—published the poetry and lyrics of its constituents during the Great Depression (Marsh, "Introduction" 4-5). Of all these organized workers, however, the autoworkers, stand out among labor's most prolific composers (Marsh, *YWT* 167). Throughout these tumultuous early organizing years, dozens, if not hundreds, of autoworkers mediated their collective experiences in verse—

capturing not only the triumphs of their organization, but also their emergent identity as a collective fighting force, their challenges shoring up support for their movement, their dreams of a “democratic” workplace, and their frustrations with union infighting.

“Protest Lyrics at Work: Labor Resistance Poetry of Depression-Era Autoworkers” argues that the poetry and song lyrics written by these unionizing autoworkers offers scholars a unique lens through which to understand the sensibility behind this massive uprising of working-class men and women. These poems and lyrics show both individual and collective creative expression of class-unity, not only through rallying chants (as might be expected) but also through a rich diversity of expression and a discourse wholly unique to industrial workers who felt they were seizing upon their moment in history. Drawing on the methodologies of American studies as well as social and cultural histories of the labor movement, this dissertation examines a collection of more than 100 poems and song lyrics written by both autoworkers and UAW auxiliary members, investigating their social, cultural, and political contexts. (Later in this section, I will describe why I’m necessarily addressing both songs and poems together.) These verses were published in UAW newspapers, printed in hand-made strike bulletins, or scribbled on papers that ended up among union-related ephemera. Today, many survive only on microfilm or on single pages at the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor in Detroit or the Labadie Collection at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

While the verses found in these documents may initially seem simplistic or didactic, a closer consideration reveals a stunning diversity of style, scope, and topic. Autoworkers wrote about a wide range of experiences including assembly-line work, providing for their families, paying union dues, and planning acts of protest. Many lines

are carefully crafted—sometimes narrative in form and sometimes abstract. Whatever their form, versifying provided workers with a creative outlet and a common moral code that fostered pride and cooperation. In this respect, these poems and song lyrics, written by activist working-class Americans, restructured dominant pro-capitalist narratives of the Depression era and provided union members with a vision for a different kind of future—one in which they could have a voice in their workplace, work at a more humane pace, and expect a dependable, livable income.

More broadly, the connections between these poems and their wider artistic underpinnings help us to more deeply understand the array of cultural touchstones and influences working-class Americans drew from. As these poems demonstrate, their range of influence is multi-faceted; Depression-era autoworkers drew from popular poetry, cartoons, Civil War songs, World War I songs (which many workers picked up as young soldiers), Wobbly tunes, blues music, and traditional folk and children's songs. The tropes of their poems draw from utopian communist Popular Front influences as well as mythologies about industrial capitalists. Reading these poems as a collection provides insight into the outlook, values, struggles, cultural influences, and priorities of the workers who wrote them.

Scholarly interest related to autoworker poetry and music

The bulk of scholarly interest in the cultural aspects of autoworker unionization during the Depression pertains to songs written as part of the 1936-37 Flint sit-down strike. Writers telling the history of the strike have reprinted these songs to add a colorful dimension to descriptions of how the strikers spent their days of occupation. For instance, union organizer Henry Kraus, in his first-person account of the UAW's formation,

Heroes of Unwritten Story: The UAW, 1934-39 (1993), reprints the lyrics that Flint strikers fashioned to the tune of “The Martins and the Coys” (247). And in *Labor in America: A History* (1966) (now in its eighth edition), Melvyn Dubofsky and Foster Rhea Dulles reprint the lines to “Sit Down,” a popular strike song by UAW general council Maurice Sugar; the song became a favorite during the sit-down (281). Additionally, Sidney Fine, in his classic history of the Flint occupation, *Sit-Down: The General Motors Strike of 1936-1937* (1969), discusses the songwriting and singing of Flint strikers; he reprints both “Sit Down,” and the lyrics that strikers composed to the tune of “Gallagher and Shean” (163-64). The most exhaustive study of Flint’s strike songs is a long chapter in Timothy P. Lynch’s *Strike Songs of the Depression* (2001). In this study, Lynch tells the story of the Flint strike as framed by the lyrics composed by strikers. He has unearthed several more-difficult-to-find songs and offers keen insight into their composition and usefulness as a unification tool. While the study of Flint strike songs sheds light on some of the cultural productions of autoworkers during the Depression, these songs are only a small fraction of the creative work of activist autoworkers of this period.

Poetry (as opposed to song lyrics) written by autoworkers in the labor movement received scant scholarly attention until recent years. John Marsh’s groundbreaking collection of more than one hundred poems by Depression-era union members and activists *You Work Tomorrow: An Anthology of American Labor Poetry, 1929-41* (2007) reprints several examples from the *United Automobile Worker* that had not been seen since the Great Depression. This book inspired me to dig more deeply into the history of autoworker poetry.

Marsh also published an article titled “United Auto Writers: Poetry from the *United Auto Worker*, 1937-1939” (2008) (which appeared separately from his anthology of labor poetry), in which he provides a model for how the poetry written by union members can be historicized and contextualized; he analyzes several examples of poems published in the *United Automobile Worker* during those years to show how poetry was an important aspect of forming group solidarity for individual UAW campaigns and in light of specific management initiatives.¹ Marsh’s work follows in the tradition of Cary Nelson, who, for more than two decades, has championed the recovery of understudied poetry “written out of the story of modern literature” (*Repression* 23). In *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory (1910-1945)* (1989) and *Revolutionary Memory: Recovering the Poetry of the American Left* (2001), Nelson takes a broad view of “modern poetry”— and uses the word “modern” to delineate a period rather than a style of writing. He warns against traditional scholarly efforts to construct a narrative to describe modern poetic types, declaring that “[t]he full range of modern poetries is so great that it cannot be persuasively narrativized in any unitary way” (“Introduction” *Repression* 7).

More recently, Ivan Greenberg, in his article “Proletarian Literature from the Bottom Up: Workers and Poetry During the Rise of the CIO,” (2015) offers a scholarly overview of poems by workers published in early CIO newspapers, including many examples of poems by UAW members. He re-prints or excerpts many of the most memorable poems published in the *United Automobile Worker* from the Depression era, and he elaborates with care on the marked differences between poems by unionizing workers and those of poets involved in the more-or-less contemporaneous proletarian

literary movement. (I discuss and expand upon these assertions in more detail in the next section.)

Of the scholars who have written about cultural production of the 1930s as it relates to the labor movement, specifically, Michael Denning's sweeping analysis of the "cultural front" is the most widely recognized. In *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (1996), Denning asserts that the 1930s' "laboring of American culture" (xvi-xvii) and particular concern with the plight of the working class caused cultural reverberations felt far into the twentieth century, even as leftist political movements lost momentum with the onset of World War II and the Red Scare. Denning describes the groups of artists and intellectuals involved in what he broadly terms the "cultural front"—or the left-leaning workers who created the rising commercial, state-financed, and private cultural apparatus of the 1930s that, he contends, influenced every nearly aspect of popular culture in the decades that followed. Denning recovers the word "cultural front" to broadly define the cultural productions of the Popular Front, under which poetry by unionizing autoworkers can be classified (xix).

While Denning's work has recovered the 1930s as a critical moment in framing twentieth-century American culture, critics note that Denning's notion of the cultural front downplays conflicts among leftists and the influence of the Communist Party on American popular culture in the mid-twentieth century.² In addition to this concern, Denning's focus on the CIO as central to the "laboring" of American culture seems to suggest that the cultural creations of those involved in the labor movement would figure prominently into his study. In some respects, Denning does focus on the cultural influences of workers—but these are primarily cultural workers—and specifically

second-generation immigrants who acquired positions in the culture industry. When he draws attention to industrial workers, he often frames them in the role of *consumers of* rather than *creative contributors to* American popular culture. (A notable exception is his fascinating recovery of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union production of *Pins and Needles*.)³ Expanding upon his work by recovering how industrial workers *themselves* created their own cultural productions is an important aspect of my project.

While labor poetry is a crucial aspect of the cultural production that occurred during the 1930s, Depression-era labor poems also continued a long tradition of worker and union verse composition extending back more than a century earlier. Indeed, as Marsh writes in his anthology introduction: “As long as workers have earned wages, worked under compulsion, or tried to form unions, they have tended to compose songs and poems about their experience” (5). The poetic tradition has been an aspect of worker cultures throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Marsh writes, “Lowell mill girls, slaves, Knights of Labor, miners, Socialists, and Wobblies all composed songs and poems that reflected—and oftentimes inspired—working-class dissent and resistance” (5-6).

In the labor-organizing cultural tradition, songs and poems have also long been more closely related than in popular or literary culture more generally. Still, the focus of literary scholars of the twentieth century has been on labor *poems*, while the focus of labor historians and folklorists has included a study of *songs*. Moreover, while labor historians focused on the nineteenth century have generally overlooked the *poems* composed by nineteenth-century workers, labor *songs* and so-called “song-poems” (a hybrid form) have received modest attention. Most notably, Clark D. Halker in *For*

Democracy, Workers, and God: Labor Song-Poems and Labor Protest 1865-95 (1991), studies how song-poems united workers in common cause during the Gilded Age. The term “song-poem” appears to have been a creation of Halker himself; song-poems are created when new lyrics are written to old songs and printed, but rarely actually sung. In his study, Halker finds that poets frequently borrowed from “folk songs, hymns, and a variety of other sources” (85) to create song-poems. As Halker explains, popular melodies were considered fair game for adaptation, and song-poems were an important feature of the labor movement: “Tunes, like some texts, passed from one generation to the next, sometimes entering oral tradition. They might become identified with one song, transferred to another, or several other, songs; or evolve into a number of variant tune forms. In an era that had no copyrights, tunes moved freely” (86).

Halker is perhaps the first historian to use the term “song-poem,” but he is not the first to write about this genre. Philip S. Foner collected 550 nineteenth-century labor songs in a remarkable volume (with an accompanying record) aptly titled *American Labor Songs of the Nineteenth Century* (1975).⁴ Foner does not reference the term “song-poem;” however, many of the examples Halker cites are from Foner’s collection. While those involved in the labor movement have long sung songs at meetings and protests, both Halker and Foner acknowledge that many song-poems appeared only as written verses and likely remained unsung. Hence, these “songs” that exist only in printed form are closely related to poems (Halker 36; Foner, Preface xiv). Illustrating the close affinity between labor songs and poetry, Foner himself had difficulty distinguishing between “labor songs” (especially those without references to popular melodies) and poems that

appeared in nineteenth-century labor journals. He writes, for instance, “It is often impossible to tell whether a printed stanza is a poem or a song” (xiv).

The same might be said of hundreds of Depression-era labor song-poems. In the early twentieth century, printed song lyrics, written by readers, continued to appear in the labor press, alongside poems that are more easily identified as poetry. In addition to adapting “folk” songs, by the twentieth century workers borrowed songs they heard on the radio and played on records.⁵ While many songs that appeared in UAW newspapers were perhaps never sung, many others *were* shared as an important aspect of unionizing, and especially as part of strike and sit-down culture.

Nevertheless, given the similarities of textual treatment that songs and poetry received in labor publications of the Depression, I assert that trying to isolate poems into a group fully separate from songs limits our understanding of the full range of labor poetry written during both the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In early UAW publications, as well as in earlier labor publications, songs appear alongside poems and are given similar textual treatment—to the extent that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish one form from the other. This textual treatment implies that laborers and labor organizers themselves considered songs and poems to be closely related. For this reason, my dissertation on the poetry of UAW workers of the Depression era incorporates song lyrics into the discussion. To ignore the songs and focus on the poems (or vice-versa) would obscure the way these two closely related genres share the same discourse and tropes—as well as publication venues; such an analysis would privilege academic traditions distinguishing one genre as independent from the other, while ignoring the reality of how closely song lyrics and poems were actually treated in protest publications

and practice. This study is unique in that it examines the poetry of Depression-era autoworkers *alongside* the songs that UAW songwriters wrote at the same time—thus drawing on what I argue is the full range of worker-composed creative verse of this time.

Further, “Protest Lyrics at Work: Labor Resistance Poetry of Depression-Era Autoworkers” expands on existing scholarship by culling from fresh archival research and offering a new, in-depth, historicized perspective on Depression-era songs and poems. This is the first study of this sort to draw from the extensive collection of archival newspapers and union-organizing memorabilia available at the Walter Reuther Archives at Wayne State University in Detroit and the Labadie Collection at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Thus, I broaden the body of poetry and songs from those that have already been examined, and I rely on my material findings to contextualize both the poems and songs of Depression-era UAW members. This study is also the first to examine how Depression-era workers rewrote the same song and poetic parodies with different lyrics over many years. This study uses this phenomenon to map evolutions and foreclosures in worker representations of class-consciousness throughout this timeframe. This dissertation also offers a groundbreaking perspective on the decisive role that gender played in the composition of songs and poems by both male and female autoworkers, as well as members of the often militant UAW Women’s Auxiliary. Finally, I provide new contextualization and depth to the many poems and songs that autoworkers wrote in reaction to the UAW’s painful factionalization at the end of the 1930s.

CIO poetry vs. poetry of the literary left

One aspect of 1930s popular culture that gave autoworkers the confidence to write poetry and music is the Depression-era’s shift in cultural zeitgeist toward a focus on “the

worker.” As the Depression deepened, the widespread desperation of so many unemployed and underemployed workers exposed severe fault lines in the capitalist system. Americans who experienced the hardship of the Depression or read about the widespread misery caused by economic hardship, increasingly shared a sentiment that the relationship between workers and capitalists needed to change. In 1933, Granville Hicks, who soon became an editor for the *New Masses*, published his famous, controversial essay, “The Crisis in American Criticism.” In the essay, Hicks asserts that novelists should align themselves with the “proletariat” as a matter of discovering truth. He writes that, although objective truth exists, “there is no such thing as personal objectivity, in the sense of freedom from class influences” (5). However, he declares that “the proletariat [...] is most likely to approximate objective truth” because this is the class “which has [...] least to gain by distortion” of the truth under the capitalist system (5). In summation, Hicks calls on critics to judge books based on how well they represent the concerns and viewpoints of the laborer. He further insists that authors should align their own identities as much as possible with the identities of workers. He writes that “inasmuch as literature grows out of the author’s entire personality, his identification with the proletariat should be as complete as possible. He should not merely believe in the cause of the proletariat; he should be, or should try to make himself, a member of the proletariat” (5).

William Leiserson, chairman of the National Mediation Board, illustrated the shift in American culture by analyzing a recent change in American rhetoric regarding labor. As he pointed out in 1938, what Americans had once called “the labor problem” was, in the 1930s, referred to as “labor relations” or “industrial relations” (8). This subtle change in vocabulary accounted for the more complex and varied ways that American companies

now “managed, controlled [and] adjusted” these ‘human relationships’ in an evolving process (9). As he explains, “Employer and Employee are no longer the economists’ abstractions, Capital and Labor, but personalities bound together in contractual arrangements not unlike the relationships set up by the marriage contract” (9). Along these lines, the idea that wages should be determined by a “market value,” with no consideration of the wellbeing of the employee, were coming under increased scrutiny. The setting of wages was increasingly no longer thought to be something that is best determined by a “natural law” of economics (16). As Leiserson writes: “there is a growing popular feeling that the trader’s cash considerations may be as ugly and subversive elements in labor relations as they are in family relations” (19).

Early unionization efforts, and calls by those such as Hicks, inspired middle-class poets and writers of the literary left to take this ethos of growing respect for the working-class to heart. The movement of writers toward focusing on working-class stories and issues, which actually began before and ended after the decade itself, is roughly associated with both the *New Masses* and a host of literary journals started by young writers belonging to Communist-supported John Reed Clubs that sprouted up nationwide in the first half of the 1930s.⁶ Poets who emerged from this movement include several who have received growing scholastic attention, including Tillie Olsen, Muriel Rukeyser, Herman Spector, Sol Funaroff, Genevieve Taggard, and Kenneth Fearing. Noted African-American leftist poets who were writing during the 1930s include Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown—who emerged from the Harlem Renaissance—and newcomers Richard Wright, Margaret Walker, and Robert Hayden; these writers were largely associated with

the Black Literary Left and incorporated proletarian themes while still exploring and affirming African American identity and heritage (Wald 83).⁷

This dissertation offers an alternative to the dominant narrative of the 1930s “literary left,” and leftist poets who distinguished themselves from the aesthetic tradition of modernism by arguing in favor of more politically engaged literature.⁸ (This movement has also been, somewhat confusingly, called the “proletarian literary movement.”⁹) A primary difference between UAW poets and poets of the literary left is that the worker-poets focus much less on ideology and more on coming together in a common cause for mutual benefit. Along these lines, Greenberg credits worker poets with creating a poetry that is more effectively “wedded to action” than poetry by poets in the proletarian literary movement. Simply put, unlike many poets of the proletarian movement, worker-poets drew on first-hand experience as both workers and union activists. As Greenberg observes, “An intimate knowledge of the labor process helped in the production of creative expression at a moment when wage earners discovered their own power and organized resistance to management power” (415). Greenberg has also suggested that the proletarian poets were more likely than CIO poets (including those in the UAW) to describe “workers as downtrodden and alienated, crushed by capitalism,” while worker-poets themselves “privileged [their own] dignity, perseverance, and successful struggles against adversity” (414).

I agree with this assessment. Indeed, when Depression-era UAW poet and columnist Ralph Marlatt describes the songs and poems written by autoworkers in the late 1930s, he makes no comparison between worker poems and those written by the poets of the literary left—and he seems to be unaware of the literary left’s existence.

Rather, Marlatt refers to an emergent working-class culture as something wholly new and exciting that allows working-class people to draw upon their daily experiences *at work*. He writes: “Our writers, our artists, our singers are the people in the shops. Their art is woven around the shops. It is a culture that is strictly American, a product of the industrial age in which we live” (Marlatt, “Nuts and Bolts” of July 26, 1939, 5). These artists, according to Marlatt, create a new form of art that is accessible to everyone—“art that you can understand.” He writes, “We the workers, are creating the new culture and we, the workers will enjoy it” (Marlatt, “Nuts and Bolts” of July 26, 1939, 5).

A distinction between art made for and by working-class artists and art made in sympathy for the working class can be observed in the differences in perspective of “To an American Workman Dying of Starvation,” a 1933 poem by Genevieve Taggard and “The Hitch-Hiker,” written by an anonymous Auto-Lite worker and published in the *Lansing Auto Worker* in February of 1940. Both poems are ironic, didactic, social critiques, written in the voice of someone who is ideologically opposed to the poem’s actual sentiment. They also both deal with the suffering of working-class people. However, their implied audiences and lessons for the reader imply a dramatically different worldview. Taggard’s poem reads:

SWELL guy, you got to die.

Did you have fun?

I guess we know you worked.

I guess we saw you.

It got you just the same.

Say it with Flowers.

So long. We got the breaks. But we’ll be seeing you.

There’s a little job we got to attend to up here first. (71)

This poem stresses the helplessness of a dying worker and the uselessness of the bourgeois speaker's empty, advertisement-inspired pronouncements over him. In this sense, Taggard directs her social critique against the bourgeoisie's allegiance with the moral codes of capitalism—and the impersonal way that empty commercial clichés (themselves creations of the capitalist system) are often evoked to smooth over the offenses of the capitalist system. The worker himself is voiceless and faceless; his sole role in the poem is to elicit the remarks of the speaker. In this sense, while the poem is titled “To an American Workman Dying of Starvation,” the poem is actually about bourgeois complicity in the suffering of a working man, and it is directed toward a middle or upper-class readership.

The Auto-Lite worker's poem similarly highlights the poor condition of workers, but emphasizes action from working-class readers, rather than a critique of commercially inspired clichés. While Taggard's poem assumes a bourgeois reader, “The Hitch-Hiker” assumes a reader of the working class. This poem's speaker is a freeloading worker who sarcastically applauds the efforts of union organizers insofar as they benefit him. The poem's critique, in this case, is directed toward a worker who simply allows unionists to pay union dues and fight for fair wages on his behalf. The final two stanzas of the five-stanza poem read as follows:

Oh, the union is grand.
They deserve a big hand.
For the grievance they settle each day.
But, comes to the dough,
That's the other guy's woe.
It's one buck cheaper this way.

As long as these guys.
Don't seem to get wise,
And make me deliver the goods,

Why the union is swell,
They can all go to hell—
I'll laugh up my sleeve at these dudes. (Auto-Lite worker 4)

In contrast to the Taggard poem, “The Hitch-Hiker” implies intimate knowledge of working-class culture from an insider’s perspective. The speaker is aware of union dues—making the reference to the “one buck” the speaker refuses to pay. The language is working-class vernacular, using plain-spoken phrases such as “go to hell,” as well as union jargon, such as the word “grievance,” and the phrase “get wise,” commonly used in labor organizing of the decade, as I will elaborate in Chapter 1. Implicitly, it further offers the working-class reader a way to participate in creating a better system—by acting differently from this freeloading, “hitch-hiking” speaker.

In addition to exhibiting and assuming an “insider” knowledge about union organizing, autoworker poets were more likely than writers of the literary left to write poems airing gripes about fellow workers and corrupt managers, make references to the daily grind of industrial work, refer to ongoing strikes and union leaders, and pen poems about the importance of showing up on the picket line during strikes and paying union dues.¹⁰ I also argue that the autoworker poets were more likely to incorporate song and poetry parodies into their work. (And, as I have mentioned, the publications that circulated their work were unlikely to clearly differentiate between song parodies, poetic parodies, and original poems, more generally.) My research shows, in particular, how autoworkers used parodic approaches in surprising ways. While we usually think about parodies as one-off creative works, my research shows that Depression-era working-class writers wrote and rewrote the same poems and songs time and time again, in ways that can be mapped to show how patterns of thinking changed across time and space.¹¹

Given their largely shared concern for the plight of the working class, the stalwarts of the literary left either had little awareness that union publications regularly published poems or didn't see these poems and songs as "literary" enough for inclusion in discussions about poetry that promoted a working-class sensibility. Despite pleas by Mike Gold, editor of the *New Masses*, for workers to submit poetry, autoworker poets who wrote for UAW publications were only rarely featured in the pages of literary journals—and by and large, they did not write poems that would tend to be dubbed "literary." A lively debate within the pages of the *New Masses* in late 1937 and early 1938 illustrates that the literary left did not consider—and were perhaps unaware of—the poems published in labor newspapers.¹² The debate began when George A. Gullette, an English instructor at the University of Toledo, submitted an article to *The Forum*—a centrist journal airing a wide range of political opinions—declaring that, "Poetry is dead." In the article, which he delivers in a jocular tone, Gullette describes how poetry, since "the heroic days of Beowulf," has grown increasingly exclusive and divorced from real-life experiences (336). Gullette concludes by advocating in favor of Whitman's call for readers to awaken to their own senses and "listen to all sides and filter them for yourself" (qtd. in Gullette). Calling poets "long-haired boys" and equating poetry with effete elitism, Gullette applauds the guiltless return to first-hand experience that the death of poetry allows (336).

When the *New Masses* summarized this piece, editors included a telling summation of a reply to Gullette's declaration. Albert Shepard, described as a "field representative for the CIO in Toledo," insisted that Gullette's pronouncement showed a lack of awareness for the appreciation of poetry among workers. While the *New Masses*

does not say whether Shepard referred to workers *writing* poetry, his quotes do show that he saw poetry to be a vital component of the labor movement. As he writes:

I have seen workers in hundreds of union halls listen intently to Carl Sandburg's *The People, Yes*. They come after hard hours of work to listen to Langston Hughes and Paul Engle and Genevieve Taggard. The rebirth of the American labor movement has accompanied a rebirth of poetry in the tradition of Whitman. It is a poetry that talks the language of the people. And the people gather eagerly to hear it. (qtd. in "Is Poetry Dead?" 9)

The column received many responses, including one from Lee Hays, a labor educator and folksinger who later joined the Weavers quartet, which also included Pete Seeger. Hays argued that the poetry being published in the *New Masses* (and therefore aligned with the literary left) was itself too *highbrow* to be of interest. He claims, for instance, that he "worked in many a cornfield" but he doubts "Muriel Rukeyser ever came near one" and claims that reporters had written more effectively about the problem of silicosis (21). The aim he takes at Rukeyser is based on what he finds to be an alienating syntax, which he connects directly to the implication that she misunderstands the working class: "Miss Rukeyser may be prejudiced against verbs, but we poor unemancipated fools down here require verbs regularly" (21).

New Masses columnist Robert Forsythe (which was a pseudonym for Kyle Crichton) argued that poetry that is useful for workers banding together in common cause must have an element that overlaps with song. "When the workers ask plaintively for poetry they can recite aloud, they are yearning for poetry that can be sung, and we have not had enough of that lately" (12). As he concludes his essay, "It is not so much a complaint about the poets, although they must by nature resent what does not fulfill them' it is a long a passionate cry for help. The world is bitter; the world is sick; the way is hard. We shall win, but we need help in the fight." (12). Throughout this discussion,

other than Shepard's insistence that workers enjoy poetry, no one seems to be aware that workers regularly wrote both songs and poems—and made use of them in their organizing efforts. Perhaps complicating the gap between poems by worker-poets and those by poets of the literary left is the idea that, “literary” tendencies were a betrayal of working-class culture, and working-class writers avoided writing poetry that betrayed “literary” influences. Conversely, however much they claimed to be seeking poetry of the working class, those with literary training might not have recognized “nonliterary” poetry as legitimate. Alternatively, perhaps *New Masses* readers were not reading union newspapers.

Overview of chapters

In Chapter 1, I spell out, in more detail, the ways that autoworkers between 1936 and 1941 wrote poetry and song lyrics to assert that their livelihoods were something worth fighting for. I touch upon the historical context of these poems and songs within in the labor movement as well as their circulation in union publications and hand-made strike bulletins distributed during sit-down strikes. I describe biographies of two autoworker-poets in particular, before showing examples of the distinctive discourse in which autoworker-poets wrote. Next, I describe the particular working-class vernacular of industrial workers, which emphasized both masculine strength and knowledge as important instruments in fighting for workers' rights. I end this chapter by parsing out the various types of poems and songs that UAW members wrote. I divide these songs and poems into 1) those of vigorous self-assertion, 2) those that distinguish union insiders and outsiders, as well as depict Black workers in particular as both union insiders and outsiders—reflecting the larger ambivalence of the UAW toward recruiting and

representing African-American workers more generally, and 3) poems that are critical of the early optimism expressed by many unionizing workers.

While men wrote the majority of UAW-related poems of this era, UAW newspapers also published many poems by women. These include poems by wives and relatives who belonged to women's auxiliaries, as well as women who were employed as autoworkers themselves. My second chapter draws on oral history recordings and cultural histories to contextualize poems by UAW women. I describe how women writing within the movement tapped into the "brotherhood" ethos in their poems and songs. On the other hand, I also show that women auxiliary members formed their own identity apart from their husbands and male relatives in the auto industry. They often wrote songs and poems expressing their determination to support strike efforts both on and off the picket line. Fascinatingly, women autoworkers themselves wrote verses that straddled a line between supporting male unionists (playing a supportive role not unlike that of auxiliary members) and staging their own fight for fair working conditions. Part of the reason women autoworkers wrote verses both supporting men and arguing for their own workplace rights relates back to the ambiguous identity of working women in the 1930s—a time when working women were widely seen as taking jobs away from more deserving men with families. I further demonstrate in this chapter that many poems by auxiliary members imply a conversion narrative trope; in such narratives, a skeptical wife visits a union hall to collect her husband who is on strike, only to be asked by other wives to lend a hand with organizing work. By so doing, she loses her reservations for unionizing and becomes self-actualized through her selfless involvement in the effort. Finally, I show how both auxiliary members and female autoworkers sometimes broke

down the prevailing masculine sensibility by writing poems that both promoted working-class consciousness and supported unionization but in a way that was grounded in the domestic realm. Such poems bear witness to the ways in which difficult working conditions and low pay for workers could affect the home-lives of workers.

Many lyrics that appeared in union publications were parodies of popular songs, rhymes, and poems. As such, I devote Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 to tracing the evolution of parodies within the UAW and the labor movement more broadly. I argue that thinking of parodies as belonging to a long strain of poetic revisions is crucial for scholars investigating labor writing of the early twentieth century; by knowing that working-class writers in particular rewrote poetic parodies again and again, scholars will be more likely to thoroughly investigate individual poems discovered through archival research. What may first appear to be an original poem, may in fact be one link in a strain of parodies altered over decades, in accordance with evolving current events. By focusing on two examples—a song and a poem—I demonstrate how parodies can be generative subjects for research and analysis.

In Chapter 3, I show how newer parodic versions of a poem can influence the meanings of later versions. To this end, I trace the evolution of the labor-oriented poetic parody of the poem “At the Golden Gate,” which was, itself, a parody of the nineteenth-century poem “St. Peter at the Gate.” “St. Peter at the Gate”—featuring a shrew-like wife who St. Peter sends to hell—was a popular choice for recitation at small- and city-based civic and church events throughout the early twentieth century. As my research shows, its labor parody, “At the Golden Gate,”—featuring a scab who appears before St. Peter—was frequently published in labor journals during the same time period. In the 1930s,

UAW members rewrote and repurposed “At the Golden Gate” into further variations featuring stand-ins for the scab or the same story told from different perspectives. This chapter demonstrates how such parodies could be useful for hailing readers with a familiar narrative and humor. At the same time, specific parodic tropes—such as the St. Peter narrative I describe—can partially foreclose the egalitarian purposes of new parodies within the labor movement by retaining hierarchical structures underpinning the original.

In Chapter 4, I focus on how mapping parodies can be a useful approach for both reexamining existing narratives about culture and revealing connections between social groups commonly thought to be distinct. Specifically, I focus on the transformation of the wildly popular WWI soldiers’ song “The Mademoiselle of Armentières” with its nonsense refrain “Hinky-Dinky Parlee-Voo.” “The Mademoiselle of Armentières,” was brought to the U.S. by returning WWI soldiers. Early lyrics fostered masculine homosocial bonding by poking fun of the sexual proclivities (or lack thereof) of the European “Mademoiselle.” A decade later, the song had a second life in the 1930s labor movement—including within the UAW. New lyrics brought together both male and female workers in a common cause, as workers replaced quips about the “Mademoiselle” with narratives of the picket featuring auto executives including William S. Knudsen and others. Strikers from Gastonia, Elizabeth, Flint, and Detroit all sang versions. The song was traditionally re-written with verses added by singers depending on the situation. As such, it became particularly useful for union members summing up difficult and stressful strike situations in a way that characterized capitalists, the police, and others who countered their sit-down strike efforts. Ultimately, the song’s palimpsested lyrical

recreations map an evolving American class-consciousness, with the pro-labor lyrics growing more sophisticated as the decade wore on. The song's journey also sheds new light on the formation of "folk" songs within the United States and demonstrates the seldom-acknowledged connections between the 1930s American labor movement and the fraternal culture that still existed among working-class WWI veterans.

In my final chapter, I show how autoworkers used poetry to form a discourse around fractionalization of the labor movement in the late 1930s. In 1939, infighting within the UAW literally pulled the union apart. The union's first president, Homer Martin, was forced to resign as left-leaning unionists dissented over his dictatorial leadership style. As the drama of his departure played out, poems by autoworkers pertaining to Martin were printed in the *United Automobile Worker* and the *Flint Auto Worker*. This chapter shows how the violence that erupted between union factions seeped in unionists' poems. Poets wrote as if they competed in a battle of wits—each seeing who could reframe Martin's presidency with the most cleverly worded lines. One key finding of this chapter is that many features of Martin's tenure that poets mocked most hardily (including his Red-baiting and crackdown on wildcat strikes) actually remained aspects of UAW leadership culture, even after his departure. I argue that, read in a certain way, the anti-Martin poems give us a rare glimpse into how the rank-and-file reacted to an increasingly bureaucratized and professionalized union in the mid-twentieth century. Lastly, the late 1930s mark a particularly violent time in UAW history, and as such, the discourse of unionizers took a colorful turn in characterizing adversaries from either side. This chapter delves into this discourse by closely examining autoworkers' frequent references to "goons" after 1938. The word "goon" had recently gained new currency due

to E.C. Segar's comic strip *Thimble Theatre*, featuring a lumbering character named "Alice the Goon." (Better-known *Thimble Theatre* characters include Popeye, Olive Oyle, and Bleuto.) As this chapter demonstrates, autoworkers made light of the violent union factionalism they faced by incorporating Alice-the-Goon-like characters into their union newspaper drawings and making the word "goon" a common word in union discourse. Autoworker poems of this time period contain many references to factional "goons" and "goon squads" as autoworkers used the factional fight as fodder for poems.

CHAPTER 1

A CRITICAL SYNOPSIS

Autoworkers in the Great Depression had their own unique discourse; they spoke and wrote in the straightforward language of the shop floor, the beer hall, and the union hall. And this is the language that survives today in poems and songs written by autoworkers—encouraging “brotherhood” among fellow workers, mocking “shirkers,” and calling out anti-unionists as “scabs,” “rats” and “stool pigeons.” This chapter provides a critical overview and contextualization of the poems and songs that unionizing autoworkers wrote during the Great Depression and describes how autoworker-poets’ and songwriters’ specific language reflected a moral code and outlook that remained in flux throughout the Depression. I begin the chapter by laying out historical groundwork—providing a brief overview of the UAW’s formation, describing how poems and songs circulated, and detailing the biographies of two autoworker poets: Clayton Fountain and Ralph Marlatt. While other scholars have briefly mentioned both poets, my archival research sheds new light on the influences, work lives, and political concerns of both men. Approaching the middle of the chapter, I describe the particular ways that autoworker poets and lyricists wrote from masculinized personas, speaking of the importance of forming a “brotherhood”—and in so doing improving their economic security as united industrial workers. As I will describe, both masculine *strength* and *wit* were noted aspects of the idealized union brother—widely celebrated in UAW poems and songs.¹³ These characteristics are rooted in the “rough” masculine ethos of the industrial shop floor, as it evolved from the more respectable masculine ethos of the nineteenth-century craftsman.

I devote the second half of this chapter to describing how the narrative of the UAW's rise can be told through three types of poems and songs of its early membership. While all three types occur simultaneously—as various locals and individuals unevenly reached stages of development¹⁴—thinking of them as forming this narrative arc helps us to understand how these poems and songs relate both to each other and the rise of the union.

The first type I describe reflect the idealistic exuberance and self-assertion of early organizing efforts. These poems and songs were most often written when workers were just beginning to join together and they held collective optimism for the outcomes of strikes and other union-organizing efforts. In writing and sharing these songs and poems, autoworkers exercised a new collective freedom to express their intentions to fight company policies, describe the actual labor they performed on the shop floor, and mock well-known industrialists. These are what I will call poems and songs of *vigorous self-assertion*.

The second type deal with designating and characterizing union “insiders” and “outsiders.” In particular, autoworker-poets and songwriters used a special language for describing union adversaries, calling them words such as “scabs,” “goons,” and “rats.” I examine this specialized language of autoworkers, as well as “conversion” narratives relating transformations of anti-union types into union members. Moreover, historical oppression of Black workers, and attitudes designating Black workers as both union “outsiders” and “insiders” play a role in UAW poems and songs. In this section, I argue that UAW poems and songs reflect the union's ambivalent stance on the inclusion of Black workers more generally. As I will demonstrate, the UAW's rhetoric favoring the

acceptance of Black workers was undermined by the publication of one overtly racist song parody, in particular, as well as by the deluge of racist reactions to two anti-racist poems written by Ralph Marlatt.

The third type critique UAW optimism and hypocrisy. By and large, UAW poets and songwriters did not write poems and songs of self-critique until the late 1930s and early 1940s, when the realities of factionalization and bureaucratic wrangling set in. I end this chapter by briefly showing how the optimism so common in early UAW poems was later countered by poems and songs reflecting cynicism with the complex realities of UAW-organizing efforts—such as division within the union and more-than-anticipated difficulty realizing the union’s promises of egalitarianism and economic prosperity. (This is a subject I take up again in Chapter 5.)

The rise of the UAW

In the first half of the twentieth century, American autoworkers had reason to feel that their work was central to both the American economy and mythology. As the Depression hit, the modern auto industry was still new—just shy of being two decades old—yet some 23 million Americans owned a car (Babson 52). The importance of the industry to American culture gave workers a sense of themselves as playing an important role in American society—an attitude that is apparent in the poems and songs they wrote throughout the Great Depression. The rapid rise of the automobile industry resulted from the Ford Motor Company’s development of the assembly line, a crude version of which was in place by 1913. The establishment of the assembly line followed an overall industrial trend toward “scientific management” of manufacturing, or achieving mass production by standardizing parts and laying out floor plans in a way that broke down

complicated processes performed by a few specialists into simple tasks performed by many non-specialized workers. Rather than requiring skilled mechanics to build each new automobile from scratch, the assembly line de-skilled work by having workers complete repetitive tasks as car bodies and engine components rolled passed them. The new production method dropped the price of cars and sped up production enough to transform the industry. At Ford, sales grew at a mind-boggling rate. In 1909, Ford sold just 10,600 Model Ts; by 1913, using the assembly line method, the company sold some 16,000 Model Ts per month (Babson 30; Hyde 35; Barnard 5-8).

At first, Ford had difficulty convincing workers to perform such repetitive work; in 1913, the Ford Motor Company experienced a turnover rate of 370 percent, and on any given day some 10.5 percent of workers failed to arrive at work (Barnard 10). Likely to combat these problems, in 1914 Ford offered workers \$5 per day to work in the Highland Park plant—a promise that brought far more hopeful workers to Detroit than Ford could hire. As other car manufacturers put similar assembly strategies into place, and similarly increased wages, the promise of steady, high-paying employment lured job-seekers from far and wide. They arrived from the rural mid-West, the mountains of Appalachia, the U.S. South, Canada, and Southern and Eastern Europe. Many workers fled one form of oppression or another—be it political or religious oppression in many European countries, racist oppression experienced by Black Southerners in the Jim Crow South, economic oppression wrought by the Boll Weevil infestation of Southern cotton crops or unemployment among miners in Northern Michigan. With the influx of job-seekers, Detroit grew into a distinctive, international city of nearly two million, including some 325,000 factory workers. By the late 1920s, Detroit was dominated by the Big Three auto

producers of Ford, General Motors, and Chrysler—and was also home to many smaller car manufactures and parts suppliers. The city had sprouted an urban skyline of monuments to booming industry, including the GM office building, the Cadillac Tower, the and Penobscot Building, all of which towered 40 stories or more (Lichtenstein, *Dangerous* 13-4; Babson 22-7, 30-1, 48; Barnard 10-13). In 1928, the Ford Motor Company completed construction of its colossal River Rouge complex in Dearborn, which borders Detroit. Built with the goal of self-sufficiency, the plant was comprised of some 93 buildings; in addition to car-manufacturing plants, it included onsite steel, plastic, glass, and tire facilities, serviced by trains that ran on 100 miles of track. By the 1930s, the plant employed 100,000 workers, and the Rouge’s industrial landscape and intense working conditions became the inspiration for Diego Rivera’s *Detroit Industries* murals (“Henry Ford’s Rouge”; Lichtenstein, *Dangerous* 17). While workers who arrived to work on the assembly lines found their pay was above average, and even while car manufactures offered some workers insurance and savings plans, the work remained tedious and auto-industry jobs proved both dangerous, and uncertain. Most workers were laid off for several weeks or even months each year, as car manufacturers overhauled production for new models (Babson 30-1).

Given its dependence on the auto-industry, the economic downturn of the 1930s was particularly hard on Detroit. Americans with limited resources stopped purchasing new durable goods, including cars, in order to pay for necessities. Car manufacturers cut employment by half as production fell off by about two-thirds. Those who managed to find work were paid significantly less—\$4 or \$3 per day—which was not much more than half of what auto manufacturers had paid in the 1920s. The city’s African-American

community suffered the worst hardships, as Black workers were the first to lose their jobs after having already faced discriminatory hiring practices. In some majority-Black areas of the city, as many as 80 percent of workers were reportedly unemployed. In the city as a whole, eviction rates grew to 150 per day, and thousands moved into makeshift shelters or tents. Hungry residents overwhelmed local charity organizations. For instance, as many as 700 city residents lined up for food each day outside of the Capuchin Monastery. The widespread hunger and homelessness sparked unrest, which was sometimes met with violent suppression. In March of 1932, the city's Unemployment Council assembled more than 3,000 for a hunger march on Ford's River Rouge complex. When the marchers approached the Dearborn plant to deliver a petition, a skirmish with authorities turned violent. As protesters threw rocks, guards and police shot into the crowd, immediately killing four and fatally wounding one (Lichtenstein, *Dangerous* 26, Babson 52-9; Barnard 41-2; Lewis-Colman 8-9). Soon after, a poem titled "Bloody Monday" appeared in the journal of the Communist-affiliated Auto Workers Union. It began with lines that pledged revenge for the violence:

We asked for bread.
They gave us lead.
Their hands with workers' blood are red.
Avenge! Avenge! Our murdered dead.
Remember Bloody Monday. (1)

Autoworkers who found employment during the Depression had to work harder to keep up with manufacturing demands. The "speed-up"—or a manufacturing tactic of speeding the assembly line in an effort to increase production—was a widespread grievance among workers who complained that sustaining their tasks at increased speeds became nearly impossible. "As the Depression deepened, the men tended to work close to

the limit of their capacities,” recalled John W. Anderson, who was a metal finisher at Briggs in Highland Park in 1929, during the stock market crash. “It was this speed-up which became unbearable and finally caused the workers to organize” (47). A description of a speed-up printed in a 1935 National Recovery Administration report is disturbingly typical: “The men work like fiends, the sweat running down their cheeks, their jaws set and eyes on fire. Nothing in the world exists or them except the line of chassis bearing down on them relentlessly” (qtd. in MacDonald 163).

As Anderson recalled, the speed-up was far from the only complaint among those who were fortunate enough to find work in the early Depression. As a metal-finisher at Dodge in December of 1932, Anderson worked staggering hours—“from twelve to fourteen hours a day seven days a week” (52). Many autoworkers also faced dangerous working conditions that could result in the loss of a finger or a limb. As a metal-finisher, Anderson constantly had to inhale particulate material flung out by whirling machines, including “lead dust, iron filings, and [...] sand” (52). As he recalled, “It was an accepted fact that thousands of metal finishers in the auto industry suffered from lead poisoning but at that time it was not recognized as an occupational disease” (52).

Long before the formation of the United Automobile Workers, autoworkers did form unions, but in the early 1930s no organization had managed to garner widespread support. As far back as 1901, mechanics demanded limits on their labor time and set uniform pay scales for skilled tasks. However, these efforts were countered by the Employers’ Association of Detroit, which managed to cripple unionization efforts by challenging strikers in court, blacklisting unionists, and using combined efforts to recruit strikebreakers. In 1913, as Ford Motor Company was perfecting its assembly line,

Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) attempted to make inroads into Ford's workforce, with organizers staging lunchtime speeches that drew thousands. The same year, the IWW organized a Studebaker walkout and attempted, with some success, to draw out workers at other Detroit car manufacturing plants. (Reported numbers of participants vary from some 3,500 to 6,000.) While the effort was short-lived and eventually subdued by police, the unionization threat likely influenced Ford's decision to raise pay for workers from \$2.25 to \$5 per day (Babson 18-21, 32-3; Barnard 32).

In the 1930s, prior to the formation of the UAW, the Communist-affiliated Auto Workers Union (AWU) played a role in fostering class consciousness among workers. The AWU had emerged from the Carriage, Wagon and Auto Workers Union, which was founded in 1891 under the American Federation of Labor (AFL). By the early 1930s, the AWU was too small to organize strikes—with a peak membership of possibly 3,000 workers—but it did have an active publishing arm, and it distributed pro-worker newspapers and pamphlets. It also supported autoworker strikes as they occurred. In the 1920s, the AFL also attempted to organize craft workers in the auto industry before the formation of the UAW. However, these attempts were generally regarded as half-hearted and ineffectual (Barnard 33-4). In 1933, facing cuts in pay and widespread job uncertainty, 15,000-20,000 autoworkers from plants across Detroit took to the picket line. Most notably, in January, some 3,000 workers from the notorious Briggs auto-body plant staged a strike that lasted several weeks, after a wage cut. The strike received support from Auto Workers Union and IWW organizers. However, it ultimately resulted in about half of the strikers losing their jobs, after the company brought in scab workers (Babson 61-3; Barnard 44-5). Also notable among unions active in the early 1930s were the

militant Mechanics Educational Society of America and the Automotive Industrial Workers Association, which grew out of a Dodge Main company union (Babson 66-7).

The United Automobile Workers formed in 1935 from the amalgamation of existing smaller unions and AFL-affiliated “federal” unions, under the umbrella of the Congress for Industrial Organization (CIO). The CIO began as a renegade industrial branch of the AFL, bolstered by the Wagner Act of 1935, which protected workers’ rights to form unions. Unlike the mainline AFL, it concentrated on organizing industrial workers, including steelworkers, electrical workers, miners, garment workers, textile workers, and autoworkers. John Lewis, the charismatic leader of the United Mine Workers of America, and other AFL leaders of industrial unions, formed the CIO when the AFL’s leadership proved insensitive to the needs of the country’s growing industrial (and largely unskilled) workforce. Under the CIO, free from the craft-division tradition practiced by the AFL, unskilled and semi-skilled laborers organized in unprecedented numbers. A surge of union membership in the UAW, in particular, occurred as the result of well-publicized sit-down strikes in 1936 and 1937.

The most well-known of the sit-down strikes occurred among Fisher Body autoworkers in Flint, Michigan, who began their occupation in December of 1936. The strike brought General Motors plants nationwide to a standstill, stopping work for some 112,000 workers. By February, after six weeks of plant occupation, having their meals delivered to them by a team of outside helpers, and holding off police, the strikers earned the UAW official recognition for its membership from GM (Frank 75; Dubofsky and Dulles 276-79). This strike, in particular, inspired a wave of sit-down strikes by unionizing workers in businesses across the country. As labor historian Dana Frank

writes, in the days following the GM settlement “all hell broke loose in Detroit” (75), as cigar makers, factory workers, truck drivers, food deliverers, store clerks, hotel and restaurant workers, and laundry workers held their own sit-down strikes (Babson 76-8, Frank 75-6). Nationally, roughly 480,000 workers participated in sit-downs from September of 1936 until June of 1937. As labor historian Steve Babson writes, “Nowhere had the movement made greater strides than in Detroit. In April alone, the UAW won formal recognition from Chrysler, Briggs, and Hudson Motors, bringing total [UAW] membership to 245,000” (91).

Despite the victory at GM and a series of other wins, the UAW’s early years were also mired by setbacks wrought by an industry intent on remaining open shop. As the LaFollette Civil Liberation Committee later discovered, labor spies were rampant within auto manufacturers. Between 1933 and 1936, General Motors Corporation spent some \$830,000 on labor spies to infiltrate local unions and disrupt organizing efforts (Dubofsky and Dulles 255). The unionization effort was also beset by power struggles within the union itself. Not every sit-down strike was supported by union leadership, and frequent wildcat strikes over squabbles between workers and managers became a bone of contention within the union. Meanwhile, while most rank-and-file unionists were not affiliated with the American branch of the Communist Party, many influential union leaders *were* Communists; this was also the era of the Popular Front, and Communist leaders took a keen interest in UAW activities, sometimes exerting influence on Communist UAW organizers. While some unionists appreciated the organizing expertise and commitment of Communist-affiliated or communist-sympathizing leaders, others worked to drive radical elements out of the union. Homer Martin, the membership’s first

elected president had a reputation as both an inspirational speaker and a Red-baiter, as well as a heavy-handed autocrat. By 1939, amid a cloud of controversy, Martin fled the CIO and established a new UAW under the opuses of the AFL, bringing his more conservative supporters with him. The immense rift caused by this early factional—and often physically violent—dispute led autoworker unionists to remain divided until the AFL and CIO reconciliation in 1955. (A more complete history of Martin’s rise and fall, as well as the violence that erupted between factions is described in Chapter 5.)

Circulation

The vast majority of poems and songs by UAW members appeared in the *United Automobile Worker*, the union’s flagship newspaper, which was founded by union organizer Henry Kraus in 1935 (A Note on the Author n.p.). This was an era when newspaper poetry was hardly unusual; throughout the early twentieth century, newspapers of all sorts regularly published poetic submissions. As Mike Chasar has found and detailed in his book *Everyday Reading: Poetry and Popular Culture in Modern America* (2012), poetry was long firmly integrated into public life; more than a few Americans treasured newspaper poems enough to carefully clip them out and paste them into scrapbooks.

The highest number of *United Automobile Worker* poems published in the Great Depression appeared in 1939, a year when columnist and poet Ralph Marlatt, a former Ford assembly line worker, wrote his weekly “Nuts and Bolts” column for the newspaper. In 1939, Marlatt alone wrote more than twenty original poems for this column. Additionally, some forty poems and songs by others appeared in the newspaper the same year, most of which were original work by autoworkers or members of the

UAW Women's Auxiliary. Much of the poetic fervor of this period was inspired by the factional fight over the leadership of UAW president Homer Martin.

Poems also appeared frequently in other UAW publications throughout the late 1930s and early 1940s. Many union locals published their own newspapers; some of these newspapers relied largely on material reprinted from the *United Automobile Worker*, but others carried original content, including regularly appearing columns. Most of these publications were full-fledged newspapers—professionally printed broadsheets with eye-catching headlines, lively news sections, editorials, reappearing columns, editorial cartoons—and songs and poems composed by readers. *The Flint Auto Worker*, for instance, ran original songs that Fisher Body workers composed and sang during their sit-down strike of 1936-37.¹⁵ Other newspapers published by UAW members included the *Lansing Auto Worker*; the *United Automobile Worker, Packard Edition*; the *United Automobile Worker, Dodge Main News Edition*; the *United Automobile Worker, Hudson 154 Edition*; the *Spotlite*, published for Ford foundry workers; and *The Plymouth Beacon*. With the exception of *The Flint Auto Worker*, only scattered issues of newspapers published by locals survive. Likely hundreds of song lyrics and poems by autoworkers have been lost in missing issues.

In the *United Automobile Worker* and other UAW newspapers, poems and song lyrics most often ran in on editorial pages among letters submitted by autoworkers. Less often, poems appeared within news items submitted by worker correspondents from various departments. These poetic submissions were most often ditties—written by individuals or groups—concerning quotidian factory life. They drew upon inside jokes

circulated on the shop floor and often mocked foremen or fellow workers. They also frequently urged more active union participation.

Aside from appearing in professional-style UAW newspapers, poems and songs also frequently appeared in less formal mimeographed strike bulletins published by sit-downers during plant occupations. Workers occupying factories had time to pursue creative writing endeavors, as they typically occupied factories for days or weeks on end (Lynch 86). In addition to writing songs and poems, workers formed bands and drew cartoons. One participant in a sit-down strike at the Bendix plant in South Bend, Indiana in 1936 recorded in a strike diary: “What with guitars, banjos, drums and mouth organs, we’re keeping up a continual concert. The boys are writing their own songs, all about the strike situation, and everybody is exercising his own voice” (“Diary of the Sit-In” 12). The appeal of strike bulletins is their spontaneity and of-the-moment quality. These bulletins were often published daily by amateur editors and reporters and were crammed with jokes, first-hand narratives, and news. In strike bulletins, poems ran alongside lost-and-found notices, menu calendars, and warnings to keep off of dormant equipment. These bulletins capture both the camaraderie and mutual respect of sit-down strike culture, as well as strikers’ militant and defiant attitudes toward police, company managers, and corporate executives.

Clayton Fountain and Ralph Marlatt

While this chapter describes poems and songs written by many UAW poets and songwriters, this section describes two UAW poets in particular: Clayton Fountain and Ralph Marlatt. In some respects, this section runs tangential to my descriptions of UAW poems and songs that follows. However, so little is known about the lives of individual

working-class artists in general that describing these two men—who both left behind detailed records regarding their life and work—presents a rare opportunity for gaining insight into how personal politics and the material conditions of industrial work can influence artistic creation more generally. What’s more, my archival research of both Fountain and Marlatt fills in never-before-reported details regarding their lives and artistic influences, as well as (especially in Marlatt’s case) a unique and historically significant perspective on early UAW organizing efforts.

Fountain and Marlatt were atypical of autoworker poets because both left detailed accounts of their days as workers, organizers, and writers. Further, Fountain, in particular, had artistic ambition beyond the union movement that seems to have been uncommon among the union’s mostly amateur poets and songwriters. Fountain later penned an often-quoted memoir about his union days titled *Union Guy* (1949), and he left behind a detailed scrapbook of documents pertaining to his Depression-era writing (currently housed at the Reuther Archives at Wayne State University in Detroit). Marlatt, by far the most prolific of all UAW poets, wrote a book-length, unpublished memoir titled “The Sweet Smell of Lilacs” that his family continues to cherish. Such accounts of working-class, marginally published, little-known writers are rare indeed. Fortunately, these accounts provide depth and context concerning the poems that each man wrote.

Fountain, who went on to have poems published in the *United Automobile Worker*, first developed a mature literary interest in April of 1936, at the age of 27, while working as a Chevrolet Gear and Axle press operator (Fountain, *Union Guy* 38, 44). A high school dropout, Fountain had nonetheless been a voracious reader as a child and had been poetry editor of his high school’s student newspaper in Manistique, a town in

Michigan's Upper Peninsula (Fountain, *Union Guy* 9-11). By 1936, however, Fountain had long drifted away from reading. That all changed when a friend who "had literary leanings" suggested he educate himself by reading books by authors such as Sherwood Anderson, Ernest Hemingway, John Keats, and Robert Browning. Fountain took his friend's advice and soon rediscovered his literary interests and passion for poetry. He submitted an early poem to *The Detroit News*, which was accepted (Fountain, *Union Guy* 45). Many other submissions followed, and Fountain became a frequent contributor to the newspaper's "Random Shots" column, which published work by local, amateur poets ("A Column Conductor Rubs Elbows With His Contributors").

Perhaps telling of how literary ambitions were perceived among Depression-era autoworkers more generally, Fountain had to endure teasing from co-workers and friends. As he recalled, "Soon I was quoting long passages of Omar Khayyam, to the puzzlement of my drinking companions" (45). Newly conscious of his own shortcomings in grammar, he began reading a grammar textbook during his work breaks, an act that raised the eyebrows of others who worked at Chevrolet Gear and Axle (Fountain, *Union Guy* 45-6). As he later recalled, "This sudden devotion to letters was very amusing to most of my fellow workers; however I stuck to it in spite of their joking criticisms" (Fountain, *Union Guy* 46). Fountain had the personality and confidence to endure, where others with poetic aspirations might have given up in embarrassment. He seems to have adopted the identity of shop poet; he wrote poems for a workplace safety campaign that bosses displayed on company bulletin boards (Fountain, *Union Guy* 54-5). Eventually, at least two of his poems were published in the *United Automobile Worker*.

However much he may have claimed the role as a shop poet who wrote poems for the local paper, Fountain also desired acceptance in more traditionally literary circles. He saved rejection letters from *Story*, *American Mercury*, and *Good Housekeeping*, pasting them among many clipped poems—by himself and others—which had been printed in *The Detroit News*. Fountain’s carefully maintained scrapbook speaks to his desire to chronicle his serious commitment toward writing and publication, as well as his hope for recognition. On the front of his scrapbook, he pasted a poem titled “To a Scrapbook,”—an ode to his personal fight against obscurity. He seems to mock his own literary efforts in overwrought, typically nineteenth-century poetic language, requesting a “charitable” reading from whomever should peruse his musings. Even so, the sentiment behind the poem seems to have been earnest:

So I beseech of all who scan this tome:
Be charitable to each fitful gust
Of aching wonder spun into a poem
By groppers in life’s swirling cloud of dust. (Fountain scrapbooks)

As this partly tongue-in-cheek poetic missive to future readers shows, Fountain wrote poems outside the union-organizing and workplace context. Moreover, he was well aware of the rhetorical adjustments required for different audiences. As I will show, his poem “Sonnet,” which appears to have been his only successful publication in a literary journal, is decidedly different from “The Scab’s Dream,” which appeared in the *United Automobile Worker* about a year later. Published in the poetry journal *Kaleidograph*, in June of 1936, “Sonnet” speaks to the poet’s determined quest for recognition. The poem, written in metaphorical, abstract language, begins:

I’m riding on the rocket of my hope
That swiftly soars into the future’s space,
Like some bright meteor on night’s dark face.

Have no time for gloom, no time for mope,
My fierce ambition scorns at any scope
That might confine it; at a dizzy pace,
It leaps and bounds, persistent in its chase
Of recognition. Avidly—I grope. (Fountain, *Kaleidograph* 13)

This poem—like that of so many popular poems of the 1930s—adopts academically poetic language reminiscent of nineteenth-century sentimental verse. The rigid ABBA rhyme scheme runs somewhat counter to the poem’s soaring language and abstract imagery. And yet, the sentiment of the poem—the speaker’s quest for recognition—reads as very real desire. While “Sonnet” is a figurative poem, Fountain still avoided outright modernist experimentation. This is the case even though, as an autodidact and reader of literary journals, he was certainly aware of modernist techniques. Also notably absent from “Sonnet” is the romanticization of suffering among working-class Americans, so common to poetry of the literary left during the 1930s.

In contrast to the metaphorical language of “Sonnet,” Fountain’s first poem to appear in the *United Automobile Worker*, published in May of 1937, is far more narrative and picks up on the trope of a scab conversion—a formula that wasn’t uncommon within the labor movement. Although Fountain read widely, his labor poems demonstrate his most sophisticated mastery of genre. Indeed, while his “literary” attempts were often rejected, Fountain’s labor poetry demonstrates his facility with language. In this poem, titled “The Scab’s Dream,” Fountain draws in a reader with both narrative and humor, telling the story of “Poor Jim,” a scab who—at first—refuses to join the union. But one night, Jim has a vivid dream, in which he envisions all of the gains that a successful union struggle would mean for his family:

Jim saw little children playing in a flower-bordered yard,
Which was rather different from the muddy alley where his own

Two kids spent many hours, playing gangster, growing hard,
Living in the only way their Dad had known.

And Jim also saw a five room home, paid up and mortgage free,
With no bankers sending constables around to put him out;
There was furniture a plenty, books to read—and Jim could see
That poverty had quite been put to rout.

There was lots of food and clothing, and the postman brought no bills
Saying, “Pay up, James, you’re two months overdue.”
Evidently some great force had cured man’s misery and ills,
And used up the wealth long hoarded by a few. (5)

Continuing the utopic pastiche, Fountain goes on to describe additional features of the dream world: a robust economy, a six-hour workday, and workers “singing at their work.” Jim is, predictably, convinced by this heaven-on-earth vision to sign up for his union. Notably, the children in this “dream” were previously unaware of any life other than that of their father—growing up “playing gangster, growing up hard.” By revealing an alternate possibility that included a flowered backyard, a well-furnished home, and freedom from debt, the poem’s narrative illustrates an awakening in working-class consciousness, after generations of accepting the social order of capitalism. However, while his dream is a romantic vision, Jim’s scab identity signifies to the reader that Fountain, the poet, is a working-class insider, aware that within union-organizing poems and songs, scabs were the most often derided characters. (In contrast, scabs were not a common feature of modernist poetry or poems of the literary left.)

While the scab trope signifies Fountain’s credentials as a labor-union poet, “The Scab’s Dream” is unusual among UAW poems for another reason: its communist-influenced vision of utopia. Indeed, while most many poems in the *United Automobile Worker* promote a working-class awakening, most were not as unabashedly influenced by socialist realism. At the time Fountain wrote this poem, he was chairman of the education

committee for Local 235 and a freshly recruited member of the Communist Party (Fountain, *Union Guy* 62-3). Although he later became disillusioned with the party's top-down-style leadership, "A Scab's Dream" is the heartfelt outpouring of a passionate neophyte. When he wrote the poem, Fountain was eager to join in a political struggle, and the Communist Party's anti-war and anti-poverty struggle profoundly appealed to him (Fountain, 63, 87-94 *Union Guy*.) As he later recalled: "The party line, then hitched tightly to the 'united front' and the 'defense of democracy,' sounded good to me. I was twenty-eight years old, full of fire and fury, and all hot to speed up the work of rooting greed and injustice out of the affairs of men" (Fountain, *Union Guy* 63).¹⁶

Unlike Fountain, Ralph H. Marlatt completed high school and even briefly attended college, before finding work on an assembly line. Marlatt was born in 1908 in Peru, Indiana and lived for a time in Hammond, Indiana, and later, Dearborn, Michigan. His father, Norval Marlatt, worked for the railroad, and was one of the original organizers of locomotive engineers, before acquiring a bakery in Dearborn. Ralph Marlatt attended one year of college at the University of Michigan, before he dropped out to assist his father in the bakery.

In his unpublished memoir titled, "The Sweet Smell of Lilacs," Marlatt offers a first-person account of his UAW activities; this account provides a fresh perspective on early UAW organizing, and it provides context for his poetry. In the memoir, Marlatt describes how, after working at the bakery, he was employed on an assembly line at Ford Motor Company in the mid-1930s, first filing metal burs off bearing caps and later as a cap inspector (Marlatt, "Lilacs" 51-2). As I will discuss, Marlatt's tenure as an autoworker was relatively short lived. After a brief time of unemployment, and then

writing radio scripts, he became a columnist for the *United Automobile Worker* and then editor of the *Flint Auto Worker*. Later in life, he worked as an organizer of dairy farmers, an editor of the *Sanger Harold* in Sanger, California, a ghostwriter for politicians, and eventually as a congressional aid for republican congressmen (Ralph J. Marlatt; Ralph H. Marlatt, “Lilacs”). His particular experiences placed him in the thick of the factional activities of the union—and he was a prolific and gifted poet and writer.

Before Marlatt had worked at Ford for very long, he naively joined the Knights of Dearborn, an anti-union, anti-communist, vigilante group that collaborated with Ford’s servicemen. Raised by a socialist father, Marlatt grew increasingly disillusioned with the Knights when he realized its union-fighting agenda; eventually he told the UAW’s Walter Reuther and union lawyer Maurice Sugar what the Knights were up to—and that he wanted to quit and become a member of the UAW instead. Reuther and Sugar, however, sensing an opportunity, encouraged him to stay on with the Knights and report back on the group’s activities (Marlatt, “Lilacs” 53-55). In this role as a spy, Marlatt soon learned that the Knights caught wind of the UAW’s plans to leaflet at the Rouge’s overpass, as part of the union’s push into Ford plants in the spring of 1937. Marlatt’s alarm grew, as he further discovered that the Knights planned for a violent ambush on the UAW leafleters. This event later played out as the infamous Battle of the Overpass, on May 26, 1937, during which Ford’s men beat up UAW organizers. The incident later drew national headlines when photographs surfaced of Ford’s men punching and kicking UAW organizers, including young Walter Reuther. Prior to that battle, Ford had long resisted unionization, even as the UAW’s leadership launched a spirited organizing effort. As Marlatt recalled, hearing the Knight’s plans for the battle, he grew nervous for the safety

of union organizers: “The River Rouge on its journey to the Detroit River ran right through the huge Ford complex and there was talk around the [Knight’s] board table of bodies being dropped in the river inside the plant grounds and how accidents could be arranged under heavily loaded cranes or alongside roaring blast furnaces.” He continues: “I made sure that Walter Reuther got all these threats and pleaded with him to be extremely careful” (59). Meanwhile, the Knights of Dearborn arranged a team to guard the plant and to specifically target Reuther and the UAW’s Dick Frankenstein. Marlatt quotes the Knight’s president saying, “Those two sons-of-bitches are never going to leave that bridge [overpass] alive” (qtd. in Marlatt, “Lilacs” 59).

Marlatt was at the Battle of the Overpass as a driver for one of the thugs who beat up the leafleters. When his rider told him to pull into a spot that would trap the unionists, Marlatt pretended that his nerves got the better of him, leaving a gap in hopes this would allow some organizers to get away (Marlatt, “Lilacs” 60). Unable to stomach participating in the physical ambush, Marlatt watched as his rider and other brutes used clubs to attack the crowd. “I had never seen men and women being savagely beaten and the sight sickened me so that I stood beside the car and retched,” Marlatt recalled (Marlatt, “Lilacs” 61). “It was all over in a few minutes and my rider came back. He was exhilarated and because of his excitement and feeling sorry for me because I ‘couldn’t take it,’ he forgave me for my panic and never suspected that it hadn’t been genuine” (Marlatt, “Lilacs” 61). Later on, feeling ill about what he had witnessed, Marlatt met with Lafollette Committee investigators about Ford’s anti-union activities, and he helped them to gather evidence against the Knights (Marlatt, “Lilacs” 61). Further, Marlatt later wrote extensively about anti-union violence in both his poetry and prose, sometimes referring to

what he witnessed outside the Rouge plant. In the months following the Battle of the Overpass, the constant fear associated with being a secret union-sympathizer working at Ford became too much for him, and he quit his job on the assembly line, although he does not specify when he took this final step (Marlatt, “Lilacs” 63-4).

During the period after he quit his job, when Marlatt was desperate for work, his father met the scriptwriter for a UAW radio program broadcast especially for Ford workers. According to Marlatt, the program “consisted of dramatized news events, short skits and some union songs” (64). His perspective on the radio show is somewhat telling of his general attitude toward agitprop art: “It was an interesting idea,” he writes in his memoir, “but in my opinion the material was too heavy and the propaganda too blatant to have widespread appeal” (Marlatt, “Lilacs” 64). His father introduced him to the scriptwriter, and he candidly shared his opinions of the program and his ideas for changes that would attract more listeners. This led him to a job at the UAW as a radio producer and eventually as a weekly columnist for the *United Automobile Worker* (Marlatt, “Lilacs” 76-7). His column, titled “Nuts and Bolts,” was a lively venue that allowed Marlatt, in his characteristically common-sense prose, to denounce capitalist greed, promote union theater efforts, tell stories about his hopes for his son, a toddler, as well as touch upon themes of egalitarianism, class-consciousness, feminism, and anti-racism. He either started or ended most of his columns with an original poem related to workers and organizing. As he recalled, the column “was widely accepted and received nationwide comment” (Marlatt, “Lilacs” 76).

Marlatt’s poetry, by and large, draws upon the language and values of the Popular Front movement of the late 1930s, a movement initiated by the Communist Party to align

the interests of the broadly defined left against the threat of fascism. The poems follow in the all-embracing poetic tradition of Walt Whitman. Like Whitman's poetic project, Marlatt's work mediates a porous vision of subjectivity as all-inclusive, spanning across time and space. The first lines of his poems oftentimes make declarations of an enlarged self-identity, declaring "I am the union" (5), "I am the worker, the master of the machine" (7), or "I am America's unemployed" (5). In his poem beginning, "I am the picket," he builds an identity in which the speaker aligns himself or herself with picketers during other important struggles in the American labor movement and beyond. By mentioning the then recent violence against strikers in Chicago, Detroit, Duluth, and Akron, Marlatt connects the picketers of his moment with picketers of the past who stood up to anti-labor brutality. One might imagine that the violence he witnessed at the Rouge plant inspired poems such as this, honoring the sacrifices of fallen activists. Note that Marlatt bookends the poem with identical beginning and ending lines—a characteristic technique perhaps wrought by the pressure of writing a weekly column. The poem reads:

I am the picket;
The army marched against me in '77,
I was beaten at Homestead in '93,
I was shot at Pullman,
Arrested at Lawrence;
They burned my kids at Ludlow
To help pile up Rockefeller dimes.
They called me a Bolshevik in '19
Because I asked for an eight-hour day,
They murdered me in Chicago in '37,
Beat and slugged and gassed me
In Detroit, Duluth, Akron.
I am the picket,
In the midst of misery,
In the face of injustice.
With the dead past and the dying present
I march,
And hell can't beat me down,

I am the picket. (7)

Marlatt's vision of unified action does not pull punches. By making connections between worker-activists of the previous century, his contemporaries, and himself—and subsuming activists of various generations under the pronoun “I”—Marlatt evokes a quasi-transcendent subjectivity stretching before and after his own historical moment. When he writes, “With the dead past and the dying present / I march, / And hell can't beat me down, / I am the picket,” he refers to the impossibility of the death of a collective fight for justice that will presumably go on living, even after the speaker's own physical death. In his poem, the interests of American unionists are aligned across eras of struggle. The sub-text is that each time someone rises up and is beaten back (e.g., arrested, gassed, or shot) that this person takes on the collective identity of all those who have sacrificed themselves in the past or will so in the future.

In nearly all of his poems, Marlatt envisions a future in which union members hold a higher standard for both sacrifice and egalitarian inclusiveness than what was usually practiced during the Depression era. For instance, during a time when the UAW itself struggled with internal racism and failing to live up to the union's rhetoric of anti-discrimination, Marlatt urged his fellow white workers to reach across racial divides. A poem beginning with the line, “I take your hand, my black brother,” (which I discuss in more detail later in this chapter) begins one of his columns in December of 1938 (7). Marlatt also uses poetic form to recognize the rarely acknowledged sacrifices of women activists involved in the labor movement, with his poem beginning, “I salute you, union women” (5).

A masculine vernacular

With the exception of Marlatt's poem saluting "union women,"—and several poems by women UAW members and Women's Auxiliary members themselves—the tenor of UAW poems is, by and large, decidedly gendered. These poems often refer to unionists as "boys," and encourage solidarity among the "brotherhood" of workers. Such references correspond with UAW rhetoric more generally, as well as editorial cartoons that ran in the newspaper. In an obvious sense, this tone reflects the fact that some 90 percent or more of autoworkers before WWII were men. (Barnard 103, Gabin 10, Milkman 32). Even as women increasingly joined the ranks of unionized workers and women's auxiliaries played a vital role in strikes and other organizing efforts throughout the Great Depression, the discourse of fraternal solidarity remained standard. As I will further describe in this section, the poets and song composers prized both masculine *brawn* and *wit* as crucial aspects of idealized worker. For instance, Marlatt's poem beginning "We are men" emphasizes both brawn and wit as essential to the working-class male identity. It reads:

We are men;
We are the men of iron,
With bulging muscles and huge backs;
We are men of wisdom,
With searching minds and keen eyes;
We are men of patience and vision,
Tending the fires of the nation's industry;
We are the auto workers,
We are men. (7)

Marlatt's rugged and wise autoworkers take particular pride in their roles as hands-on creators, "[t]ending the fires of the nation's industry"; indeed, they supply the power and "wisdom" that keep the industrial world running. Poems and songs by Depression-era autoworkers show that workers took pride in themselves as makers, even as they felt

squeezed by managers and economic hardship—and poems such as the one above reflect such pride. However, as I will discuss, while strength and wisdom were credited as the essential tools of male *creators*, they were much more often cited as the essential attributes *union brothers* would need to fight in order to retain their economic dignity as providers. As I will show in this section, this particular deployment of brawn and brain to collectively fight the bosses and gain economic stability grew out of the cultural conflict between the traditional craftsman and the new industrial worker.

To further describe this emergent form of industrial masculinity, some further background is helpful. Labor historian Stephen Meyer, in his influential article “Work, Play, and Power: Masculine Culture on the Automotive Shop Floor, 1930-1960,” draws from records of autoworker grievances to trace two forms of masculinity emerging among industrial workers in the mid-twentieth century: 1) a “respectable” type, rooted in the fading craft tradition and associated with egalitarian rights for craft workers and economic prosperity and 2) a “rough” type, connected with unskilled workers in the increasingly industrial workplace, defined by a provocative subversion of the moral codes of the fading respectable craftsmen—and by insolent acts, such workplace drinking, horseplay, and acting tough.¹⁷ Fascinatingly, Meyer contends that the “rough” style of masculinity emerged from the very deskilling of labor itself, as the new form of repetitive work stripped both “male traits of brawn and brain from workplace skills.” As he sums up manual work in the mid-twentieth century, “For both craftsmen and laborers, their work became unmanly” (119). This state of affairs resulted in pressure for working-class men to “remasculinize” their workplaces—something they did by asserting themselves through horseplay on the shop floor—as a way of breaking up workplace boredom—as

well as “drinking, fighting, gambling, and confrontational opposition to management” (119, 121). Such performances of rough masculinity blended with residual aspects of respectable masculinity, as industrial workers continued to seek the fraternal bonds and economic benefits of the fading craft-worker tradition (119).¹⁸

However much displays of masculinity through workplace horseplay resulted in injury, or loss of workplace privileges, the shop-floor style of fraternal feeling could also foster a sense of camaraderie among workers, as well as shore up group resistance to unpopular workplace mandates (Meyer 127). Sabotage, wildcat strikes, and slowdowns were all resistance efforts that required subtle knowledge of group dynamics that resulted from homosocial bonding—the type that is fostered by horseplay. As Meyer asserts, “Whether they simply played on the shop floor or collectively and aggressively restricted output, their ‘manly bearing’ readjusted and redistributed the balance of social power at the workplace” (131).

Labor historian Lisa Fine notes a corollary in the union-organizing effort at Lansing’s Reo Motor Car plant in the mid 1930s. As she concludes, based on accounts of union organizers, a rapid growth in union membership at Reo occurred in the mid-1930s due to workers becoming aware that their wages failed to increase in line with rising industry earnings and the cost of living. The union seemed to offer workers a way to reassert masculine respectability (formerly associated with craft unionism) by means of economic stability. As Fine writes, “If the company could no longer deliver on the promise of a family wage and masculine autonomy, the union would” (81).

This “remasculinization” of autoworkers is apparent in the poetry and songs of UAW members, in which UAW poets and songwriters often assert that workers have (or

should acquire) both the masculine strength and the wisdom needed to achieve their collective goals. For instance, the *Lansing Auto Worker* published a song parody that describes an ideal “union man” as possessing both masculine strength and knowledge—both of which are directed toward fighting off the violence and trickery of bosses. Composed to the tune of “When Johnny Comes Marching Home,” each of the parody’s verses is dedicated to describing an essential aspect of an idealized, masculine, union member. The first verse begins, “A Union man is a fighting man.” In the next, the “Union man is a thinking man.” In the final two verses, he is a “loyal man” and a “working man.” The song begins:

A Union man is a fighting man
He never stops
He’s not afraid of the company threats
Or company cops.
The spies and sluggers can try their tricks
They’ll always find him hard as bricks

A Union man is a thinking man
Nobody’s fool.
He’s smart enough to call the bluff
Of the company’s stool.
When the company offers are brought to light
He sees a bargain and sees it right.
Anyone can see
A thinking man is he. (“A Union Man” 2)

In this vision, union man is again a man of physical strength. But this time, unlike the idealized autoworkers in Marlatt’s poem described earlier, this union man must fight “company threats,” “cops,” “spies and sluggers.” I argue that—as industrial workers increasingly held jobs that required fine motor skills rather than strength—union members nevertheless retained “strength” as an attribute they could use in pursuit of prosperity. Rather than exerting his strength at work, the union member could redeploy

his “manly baring” on the picket line, fighting off anti-unionists. Similarly, the craft wisdom which was needed by nineteenth-century craftsmen to create something new, was no longer necessary in the industrialized workplace of the twentieth century.

Unionization, however, allowed industrial workers to retain this attribute by redeploying it to outsmart bosses. In the above poem, this union man uses his “thinking” so that he is “Nobody’s fool” and “He’s smart enough to call the bluff / Of the company’s stool.”

Indeed, the need to deploy masculine strength and wisdom to fight off the bosses was oftentimes summed up in the poems and songs of unionizing autoworkers as a directive to “get wise” about exploitation of the working-class. While the words “get wise” were no doubt often used because “wise” perfectly rhymes with “organize,” the idea of what it meant to “get wise” also captured the combination of roughness and street knowledge required of the unionizing industrial worker who demanded respectable economic status. To “get wise” meant being tough and recognizing who could be trusted, the potential power of collective strength, and the root of oppressive forces in workers’ lives. Those who had “gotten wise,” had also acquired a knowledge of workplace dynamics that were necessary for staging acts of protest. This sort of knowledge is described by steelmill worker Steve Packard, in his 1978 book *Steelmill Blues*. In this book, Packard describes gaining consent among workers to participate in group sabotage as a process done through silent communication. “The men don’t usually talk about this stuff; communication is carried on through undercurrents and understanding,” he writes. “The only way the foreman can survive – the only way he gets a fair amount of work done in his zone – is to understand this communication-by-sabotage” (qtd. in Montgomery 156).

Time and time again, worker-poets and songwriters crafted narratives about those who “got wise,” became class conscious, and used this knowledge to fight for their rights. For instance, a poem signed a “Member of [Local] 154,” refers to business interests with the line “Their password used to be ‘Let’s economize,’” followed by the line: “But now they take it easy, because we’re getting wise” (Member of 154 7). Moreover, the poem “The Union Badge,” attributed to “Member, Local 222,” equates “getting wise” and organizing with gaining the ability to provide for one’s family, even as the deskilling of labor and lower wages makes this goal increasingly difficult. The end of the poem appeals to autoworkers’ as dutiful fathers with masculine pride and wisdom to take action. An excerpt reads:

Do you want your little children
To stand where you have stood,
Do you want them just existing—
Or a decent livelihood?
God gave us brains to use ’em,
God gave us children, too.
Can’t we get wise and organize?
These men of wealth all do.
Modern machines and methods
Are putting us to task,
Now are we standing idly by?
Are we sleeping? May I ask? (Member, Local 222 7)

Yet another poem, attributed to “A Union Ford Worker Not Yet Fired,” equates “getting wise,” with recognizing workers’ rights under the Wagner Act and fighting the bosses, just as patriots fought the British in the American Revolution:

Ford Workers! Ford Workers! It is time to get wise.
Let us show Old Henry just how to organize.
Let us tell Bennett and Brooks, and all of their stools,
The we are Americans, are no longer fools.
Let us fight for our rights under The Wagner Bill,
As our forefathers fought at Bunker Hill.
So get back of Lewis and Martin and we’ll bring home the mutton.

And soon all of Henry's men will wear a union button. (3)

Indeed, autoworkers frequently described “getting wise” or “knowing” their rights as organizers in conjunction with proclamations supporting both the Wagner Act and—for at least some workers, supporting Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal legislation. For instance, Chris O Taylor's 1937 untitled poem in the *Lansing Auto Worker* makes reference to “know[ing]” the Wagner Act “gives us the right to organize” as an important step in improving the status of workers:

Now we have a Federal law,
Known as the Wagner Labor Act,
Which gives us the right to organize,
Which we know to be a fact.

So brother do not tarry,
Apply for membership today,
For labor now is organized,
And they mean just what they say. (4)

Similarly, other songs about acquiring needed knowledge entail recognizing the controversial figure of John L. Lewis as a capable leader. For instance, a poem, signed a “Member of [Local] 154,” includes the lines: “‘Lewis is unreasonable,’ the big wigs will shout, / But, listen boys, he knows what it's all about” (7). Another poem praises R. J. Thomas, a newly elected president of the UAW, for respecting Lewis, with the lines: “Our president is not ashamed / To let the whole world know / That we are for John L. Lewis / And the good old CIO” (Lee Smith 6). In yet another poem, titled “Ode To Labor,” in which M. L. Weitherford of Local 371 takes stock of a number of labor leaders, the poet has particular words of praise for Lewis, who “knows what it's all about,” with the lines:

John L. Lewis knows what it's all about,
He is a good labor leader that won't sell us out.

We have labor in the country, we have labor in town,
If we follow John Lewis he will never let us down. (7)

No doubt the most difficult aspect of “getting wise” for many workers entailed the complex process of unlearning hegemonic notions about the ethics of capitalism and company promises of altruism. Noted labor historian David Montgomery lists “integration of the firm’s internal line of command into the country’s enormous educational establishment” (157) as being one important way that business interests control workers.¹⁹ As he writes, the logic of capital is deeply ingrained into the minds of American workers: “The cult of the expert and the myth of complexity do not simply float in our intellectual atmosphere; they are incorporated into the way in which we are educated from our first confrontation with reading and writing ‘skills’ to the ultimate professional training of the favored few” (157). Questioning pervasive American mythologies about the altruism of businesses, even in the worker-focused mid-to-late Depression, set unionizing workers in opposition to the ruling classes of their workplaces and communities. Sociologists Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, a husband-and-wife team, found anti-union prevailing opinions in their 1935 study of Muncie, Indiana—a town with a GM plant that temporarily closed at the beginning of the Depression. According to the Lynds, the dominant attitude in Muncie held that “natural order” caused the Depression and that businesses always paid workers as much as they could (409). Summarizing ideas about business and labor that dominated the city in the mid-1930s, the Lynds also found residents extoling:

That the rich are, by and large, more intelligent and industrious than the poor.
“That’s why they are where they are.” (409)

and

That the captains of industry are social benefactors because they create employment. “Where’d all our jobs be if it wasn’t for them?” (409)

and finally

That “The open shop is the American way.” (409)

And yet, even with such prevailing attitudes among the dominant class, unionizing autoworkers challenged fellow workers to “get wise” and recognize these prevailing cultural ideas as American mythologies. With attitudes favoring the interests of free-market capitalists, the poems and songs by Depression-era autoworkers urging fellow workers to “get wise” functioned as a vital counter-voice, or what political scientist and anthropologist James Scott would call a revealed “hidden transcript.” In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (1990), Scott differentiates between “public transcripts,” or the hegemonic discourse of the dominant group, and “hidden transcripts,” the secret, oppositional discourse of the subaltern (4-5). According to Scott, one hallmark of the public transcript is that the oppressed individual often finds herself or himself in the position of performing the approved discourse for the sake of avoiding further oppression. “The result is,” as Scott explains, “that the public transcript is—barring a crisis—systematically skewed in the direction of the libretto, the discourse, represented by the dominant,” and this leaves the impression with dominant classes that the subaltern “endorse their subordination and are willing, even enthusiastic, partners in that subordination” (5). Scott elaborates on his theory by concluding that a “whole race, class, or strata” of subordinate peoples can develop a hidden transcript that takes the form of a “collective cultural product” (10). We might, then, consider the songs and poems of autoworkers urging their fellow workers to “get wise” to be a “collective cultural product,” revealing and asserting a hidden transcript.

Of course, not every poem or song that voiced a formerly hidden transcript urged autoworkers to “get wise” and “organize” using these specific words. An example of a poem that more subtly implies the idea that workers should counter hegemonic capitalist mythologies is Ralph Marlatt’s poem for Henry Ford. Before I describe this particular poem, however, I will offer another poem, this one written by the popular *Detroit Free Press* newspaper poet Edgar A. Guest, whose poems were syndicated in newspapers nationwide. The Marlatt and Guest poems make for a fascinating comparison because they were both written to mark Ford’s seventy-fifth birthday. However, while they may have been written for the same occasion, they offer dramatically different views of Ford’s legacy. Guest’s poem reminds us of the dominant laudatory attitude toward Ford, pervasive outside unionizing circles. In comparison, Marlatt’s poem expresses a view of Ford that couldn’t be more divergent or revelatory of a “hidden transcript.”

Guest recited his poem “Henry Ford” to an audience of well-wishers at Detroit’s Masonic Temple—and Ford seems to have been present for this reading. The poem, later printed in a Ford Motor Company magazine, unironically describes Ford as a rare genius who freed the masses from wearisome labor. An excerpt reads:

Thousands for five and seventy years
Have lived and labored here and died;
Have won some little share of pride
And kept the faith through smiles and tears;
Thousands for lofty goals have tried,
But small achievement disappears
While he, whose life as theirs began,
Gains in one brief allotted span
All that Time ever grants to man.

This was his dream; some day that he
Might from the backs of weary men
Take the great tasks which bowed them then
And from their burdens set them free;

Might give them time to think again
And what they dared to think, to be!
Past furnace fire and crane and claw
Gear, hammer, wheel and metal raw
Men and the homes they served, he saw. (174)

The hegemonic vision of Henry Ford as one who mustered great lifetime achievements perhaps remains the vision that most Americans continue to hold. And yet, Guest's insistence that Ford's "dream" was that he would "some day" "[t]ake the great tasks which bowed them" off of the "backs of weary men," seems to acknowledge that not everyone held Ford in such esteem. Indeed, such lines likely address the very Ford factory workers who hoped to unionize as a way of making their own burdens a bit easier to bear. By talking back to unionizing workers, Guest's lines seem to be directed at obsequiously soothing any pangs of conscience the industrialist might have harbored in his aging years.

Needless to say, Marlatt's birthday poem for Henry Ford offers a very different assessment of the man's life work. Rather than celebrating Ford's rare genius and desire to make workers' lives easier, Marlatt focuses on the poverty and struggle of Depression-era Detroit residents and implies that Ford caused widespread suffering for his workers and neighbors:

Detroit,
The auto capital of the world.
Idle factories, hunger lines,
And a birthday party for the king.

I visited the morgue
And saw a tray full of babies.
They found them in alleys and ash-cans,
The man said, "We get lots of them,
The welfare sends a lot too,
Their people are too poor to bury them."

I sat in an office,
Politicians came in to talk;
The secretary was late for dinner,
He said, "we'll lick the union,
We don't need a union in this town,
Reserve me a ticket for the Cruise."

I talked to a man,
Worked twenty-one years in one place,
Never could get anything ahead
Too many short seasons, layoffs,
He said, "I'm too old now, I'm through,
Young men can work faster."

Detroit,
The auto capital of the world.
Idle factories, hunger lines,
And a birthday party for the king. ("Detroit "5)

Marlatt's poem might be read as a sophisticated rejoinder to Guest's laudatory ode to the famous capitalist. In this poem, rather than an influential genius, Ford is a detached "king," who is nonetheless celebrated much in the same manner as a ruthless dictator would be fêted by inculcated supporters. In a column that ran soon after the above poem, Marlatt describes the displays honoring his former employer and questions why residents would celebrate the seventy-fifth birthday of such a man. As he writes:

I am thinking of the Ford worker who served Henry Ford for thirty-two years and was fired because he refused to join the union as a stool-pigeon. I am thinking of sitting in an automobile and watching Ford men, under orders, beating defenseless men and women. I am thinking of the man who lost his eye on the job and the two year fight the Ford Motor Company put up to beat him out of his compensation. (Marlatt, "Nuts and Bolts" of July 30, 1938, 7).

While Marlatt nowhere tells autoworkers to "get wise" and "organize," his poem implies that unless workers question the hegemonic celebration of Ford, they will continue to live in a city where people are too destitute to afford burials for malnourished babies or end up like the industrial worker of twenty-one years who was too "washed up" to avoid

economic misery. By seeing Marlatt's poetic critique—and Ford's attitude toward plant workers and Detroit neighbors—next to Guest's laudatory ode, we are reminded of just how disruptive to hegemonic discourse UAW poems and songs really were.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will describe three distinct types of poems and songs written by unionizing autoworkers in the late Depression. Examples of all three types tap into the pervasive discourse calling for a unified “brotherhood” that honors both masculine strength and wisdom as a means for fighting business interests and questioning hegemonic mythologies.

“[W]e will tell him where to go”

In this section, I will describe the most straightforward of the three types of poems and songs written by Depression-era autoworkers: those of *vigorous self-assertion*. As I will describe, poems and songs of vigorous self-assertion can be further divided into three sub-types: 1) those of *optimistic boosterism*, which—in forthright terms—express the solidarity of workers and enthusiasm for building a better future with fair pay and job security, 2) those expressing workplace realities, illuminating the experiences of industrial life on the shop floor, and 3) those asserting class-consciousness by criticizing either immediate bosses or well-known industrial capitalists. I will begin by describing poems of *optimistic boosterism*.

Drawing from their organizing experience in the early CIO movement, Steel Workers Organizing Committee officials Clinton S. Golden and Harold J. Ruttenberg found that workers tend to go through predictable phases when they are first exposed to the idea of organizing into a union. At first, as Golden and Ruttenberg note in their 1942 book *The Dynamics of Industrial Democracy*, workers experience “the almost universal

desire [...] to tell the boss ‘to go to hell.’” While this is a phase the authors claim is short lived, they contend that “the causes that manifest themselves in this desire are rooted deeply in the personal lives of workers—in their psychology, and in their social situation—which, in turn, are influenced materially by economic factors” (4). The you-go-to-hell attitude was readily apparent during initial strikes and meetings of the steel workers who Golden and Ruttenberg helped to organize. As they recalled, “The more names their leaders called the boss, the more workers booed, cheered, applauded, stamped the floor, and sang—in brief, they loved it” (5).

We might consider poems and parodies of optimistic boosterism written by autoworkers to be one result of a newly discovered freedom to tell company officials—in verse—where they could go. Interestingly, Scott devotes a portion of his study concerning “hidden transcripts” to the moments when such transcripts enter public discourses. Such events are necessarily dramatic (204), and frequently result in a sense of relief for the oppressed person. Scott describes this relief as “[t]he intoxicating feeling that comes from the first public expression of a long-suppressed response to authorities” (209). This sense of intoxication is apparent in the poems and songs of optimistic boosterism, or those that unabashedly express faith that union organization will score meaningful victories for members. Greenberg has dubbed the poetic version of rallying verse “praise poems” (428). Such songs and poems were quite common, especially in strike settings or during times when many strikes occurred simultaneously. An example is “Victory Jingle,” which appeared in the *United Automobile Worker* in February of 1937, at the height of sit-down fervor. Its lyrics, which parody “Jingle Bells,” mock “the boss”

and—using the same parlance noted by Golden and Ruttenberg—and “tell him where to go”:

In union there is power
That’s why the boss looks sour:
He’s weeping every hour
Because he loves his workers so-o:
He loves to pay us small
While he improves his hall;
More speedup is his call
But we will tell him where to go. Oh! (14)

Another parody exhibiting optimistic boosterism is “U.A.W. Victory Anthem,” a take-off on “America the Beautiful” that appeared in the *Lansing Auto Worker* in the aftermath of a successful sit-down strike at the Reo Motor Company. Its first verse and chorus read:

I.
All working men in every land
One brotherhood shall form
United we will always stand
A new world will be born.

Chorus
To Victory! To Victory!
Will ever be our cry
With Workers’ Solidarity
We’ll fight until we die. (4)

Such songs and poems (sometimes shouted as chants) were used to encourage brotherhood and solidarity among workers. Feelings of harmony were doubtlessly underscored by the act of singing parodies in unison and hearing the voices of fellow workers united in song. As we shall see, while such songs and poems were common in the early UAW movement, as the Depression wore on and factional realities set in, some autoworker poets and songwriters cynically mocked these earlier efforts as overly optimistic.

In addition to poems and songs of optimistic boosterism, autoworker poets and song writers also asserted themselves through describing the realities of working in an auto plant. Arguing that labor historians should seek out and report on the ways that social classes are defined by the five senses, labor historian Daniel E. Bender has noted that early industrial capitalism overwhelmed workers' full experiences of the world—saturating all means of sensory perception. As he writes, “Ford’s five-dollar day (and welfare capitalism, in general) extended scientific management’s sensory control into most aspects of workers’ lives [...] Workers were expected to surrender taste, smell, and sound in return for a higher wage” (255).

Of course, while workers might have been expected to suspend their sensory perceptions, or at least act like machines, such a feat was impossible. Marlatt, in his memoir written decades after working at Ford, recalled assembly-line work in disturbing detail. Interestingly, he describes not only the alienation and objectification of assembly-line workers, but also the first-hand sensory experience of being *subjected* to the line’s constant clamor:

Any automobile plant in the late 20’s and early 30’s offered the most dehumanizing working conditions. Workers were lined up like robots at endless production lines, each performing the same monotonous single movement as a car began its journey as thousands of nuts, bolts, meaningless pieces of metal until it rolled off the final assembly line under its own power as a shiny new automobile. All this was accompanied by the continuous banging and clanging of machines stamping out parts and the lines running, running forever (50-1).

As some poems by autoworkers also make clear, the sensory reality of the workplace was only all too present for industrial workers. I include poems that describe industrial work under the citatory of “vigorous self-assertion” because such poems assert the experience of workers as sentient beings, who retain a full range of sensory experience, however

much their environment degraded these experiences, and however little industrial capitalists cared to consider them. These poems assert the alienated laboring subject as a living, breathing human by illustrating industrial work as something continuously “sensed.”

For instance, the poem “pressure...” by Poll, leaves out description altogether and provides the reader with only snippets of what one assembly line worker is told by a boss. The reader only has access to what the speaker hears, but through this, the reader can fill in details regarding the bodily exertion of heavy-industry work. The poem begins:

come on there cutter...
set the job up...
fix it tight...
use the fan...
let it blow full cold...
here's castor oil
and grease
to help the bearings
best it can...
then push it...
push it...
push it... (7)

In this poem, the reader experiences the instructions given to the “cutter,”—and, by implication, comes to understand that the worker is exposed to extreme heat. The mention of the need for a fan and the “castor oil / and grease,” indicate that the “bearings” are heating. The “cutter” is made to “push it.” The words, “push it,” repeated, imply that the job is difficult and requires difficult physical exertion at the limit of the worker’s strength.

In addition to his prose description of work at Ford, Marlatt also wrote what might be the Depression-era’s most evocative poem capturing the phenomenology of

assembly-line work. In this poem, Marlatt evokes all five senses, describing how bodily perceptions of autoworkers remain all-too-attuned to their surroundings:

Have you ever worked on a line puttin' out five thousand bodies a day?
Then, brother, you ain't never been to hell;
The bell rings and the line starts.
Bend, lift, hammer screw,
No stopping now 'till noon, or 'til you drop,
Bend, lift, hammer, screw,
And the sweat pouring into your eyes and mouth
'Til your lips are puffed with the salt of it
Your dripping hair hangs in your eyes
And you can't take time to push it back,
And your belly turns over at the smell of garlick,
Turns sick at the stench of human bodies,
Turns sick at guys spittin' tobacco juice and blood,
Bend, lift, hammer, screw,
Get production, the eternal cry,
Your back feels like it's about to bust
And you can't straighten up or stretch,
And the line keeps pushin' bodies at you,
And there ain't no way you can hold 'em back,
Bend, lift, hammer, screw,
Oh, Christ, where is that bell,
Bend, lift, hammer, screw,
Four hours of it and then fifteen minutes to eat,
Bolt a hunk of bread and at it again,
Bend, lift hammer, screw;
Have you ever worked on a line puttin' out five thousand bodies a day?
Then, brother, you ain't never been to hell. (9)

The unrhymed poem, written in the second person, evokes the sickening feelings, sights, sounds, smells, and tastes of working on the assembly line. The word “bodies” figures into this poem in two ways. First, the speaker describes how bodies of workers in close quarters necessarily invade each other’s personal space. Indeed, the poem demonstrates that other workers’ bodies figure deeply within the toil of most industrialized work, with their human byproducts of sweat, tobacco juice, and blood. Secondly, underscoring the poem’s sense of confinement, there are the car “bodies” that “the line keeps pushing” [...]

at you.”²⁰ The lunch break comes and goes all too quickly in the lines: “Bolt a hunk of bread and at it again.” Marlatt earns his repeated claim: “Have you ever worked on a line puttin’ out five thousand bodies a day? / Then, brother, you ain’t never been to hell” (9). Indeed, Marlatt’s visceral description offers a disturbing perspective on William Wordsworth’s nineteenth-century musing that for artists, “The world is too much with us.” Marlatt’s poem asserts that the same is true for industrial workers—yet for industrial workers, rather than overwhelming one with possibilities for romantic inspiration, the world assaults the senses and exploits the body.

The final type of poem and song asserting vigorous self-assertion take aim at industry executives, managers, and bosses. More than a dozen such poems and songs pertain to Henry Ford, specifically, and several others denounce greedy profiteers in general. While Marlatt’s anti-Ford poem, mentioned earlier, was quite serious, generally, the poems and songs aimed at automotive executives are among the most humorous that autoworkers wrote; several use bighting, plainspoken wit to dismantle the reputations of managers and executives. For instance, a poem titled “Henry Ford’s Grief Song,” written by Jerry Adams, who identifies himself as a “Fired foreman in brake shoe Dept. 412,” is a parody of “John Brown’s Body” that declares:

Old Henry Ford lies a’ moaning in his bed
Old Harry Bennett lies a’ moaning in his bed.
Old William Cameron lies a moaning in his bed
Because the Wagner Act got them down.

Similarly, the poem “The Phoolanthropist,” by T. F. McNabb of Local 227, mocks the philanthropic endeavors of company executives who fail to pay their workers a fair wage. The poem elaborates on all of the worthless charitable projects undertaken by a capitalist profiteer. The poem reads:

I'll sink a million in a school
To teach gorillas to play pool.
A hospital to cure tomcats
Of aches for overeating rats.
I'll found a scholarship for dogs
And teach them how to chase bullfrogs. (7)

The poem ends by exposing the hypocrisy of the speaker, who does not see workers as deserving of his charity, and proclaiming that the strength of the union will prevail in the end. The cultural work of such poems might appear lighthearted, but—as I described earlier in my discussion of “hidden transcripts”—they actually play an important role in building a distinct working-class consciousness that offered an alternative paradigm to that presented by hegemonic cultural productions.

Songs and poems characterizing UAW insiders and outsiders

Drawing distinctions between insiders and outsiders was central to the ethos UAW culture; indeed, when strikebreakers attempted to cross a picket line, unionists resorted to violent measures to assert these distinctions. As members of a larger group that held this pervasive attitude, autoworker poets and songwriters often took pains to portray union members as unified—and to assert themselves as being firmly within the UAW fold. At the same time, they ridiculed those perceived as anti-union with distinctive language that served to dehumanize them and reinforce their status as “outsiders.” To this end, UAW poets and songwriters drew from the particular discourse of union organizing to describe both themselves as union “brothers” or “workers” and label those with interests opposed unionization with words such as “goons,” “stooges,” “scabs,” “rats,” and “stool pigeons.” Indeed, “goon” as it was used in the labor movement to mean a hired “thug,” first emerged into American discourse in the late 1930s (“goon, n.”). (Chapter 5 includes a much longer explanation of this term’s etymology.) Similarly, usage of the

word “stooge” to mean “a lackey” also emerged in the late 1930s (“stooge,” n.). These words appear in particular in poetry pertaining to UAW infighting of 1939. Such words were all part of language that unionizing autoworkers commonly used to designate themselves from their adversaries.

In his “Nuts and Bolts” column, Marlatt took note of autoworkers’ particular vocabulary and invited readers to contribute new examples. He referred to their specialized discourse “auto workers’ slanguage,” combining the words “slang” and “language,” into a modern-style portmanteau. No doubt autoworker “slanguage” extended far beyond name-calling—and also included terms related to mechanized labor. Contributions to “Nuts and Bolts,” rather than being adversarial, drew upon technical language. These included “merry-go-round,” meaning “A conveyor that goes around, used in putting the trim on the backs of seats,” and “hoggin,” a word submitted by a Ford worker meaning “taking a deep cut on a piece of metal” (“Nuts and Bolts” of Aug. 20, 1938, 7; “Nuts and Bolts” of Aug. 27, 1938, 7).

While “slanguage” was pervasive in all types of poetry and songs written by Depression-era UAW autoworkers, some poems call particular attention to its use. Such poems mark the poet as *a* union insider writing *for* insiders and label “outsiders” with unflattering language. For example, the poem, “A Stoolie’s Lament,” was written by Murray Roth, a Detroit resident and member of Local 262. In this poem, Roth relies on an exaggerated autoworker vernacular—combined with a stereotypical Depression-era New York accent—to describe the thoughts of a “rat.” Although an actual anti-union informer would probably not consider himself a “rat,” the speaker boldly claims the moniker. The poem uses the words “rat,” and “stoolin’,” as well as other vernacular

expressions such as “knocks me flat,” “dirty earful,” and “double cross” to show that the “rat” and poet are well-versed in the particular vernacular of autoworkers:

Says Slim-de rat: It knocks me flat
Cause people think I’m foolin!
Me woik is art, it breaks me heart
To have ’em call it stoolin!

De CIO has made it so
Me job is gittin’ fearful,
I has to stoop and sneak and snoop
To git me a dirty earful.

I’ve often thought, If I git caught
And know that I’m a goner,
I’ll give de boss de double cross,
Upon me woid of honor.

Now folks can see dat blokes like me
Has got to use discretion,
In times like dese, I earns my cheese
De pary of my profession. (4)

In this poem, the word “rat” is both a colorful and figurative term for a snitch and describes an actual rat animal—who needs “to stoop and sneak and snoop” to ensure himself “cheese” (4). The poem both marks the poet as a union insider—through his use of “insider” slanguage—and entertains the reader by implying that anyone who would spy on unionizing workers has actual rat-like qualities.

While poems calling out rats, scabs, and other union adversaries were common, autoworkers also wrote poems and songs that narrated the conversion of someone with anti-union beliefs into a union supporter. (One notable example is Fountain’s “A Scab’s Dream,” described above.) Such poems imply that those who worked against unionization efforts could potentially be brought into the fold after experiencing a genuine change of heart. For example, in “A Rugged Individualist,” by Charles Cole of

Local 32, the speaker tells the story of a man who “thought he was wise” because he believed he could get ahead by his “merit,” alone, without the help of the union. But by the end of the poem, the worker has come to his senses and hopes that his former behavior can be forgiven. The end of the poem reads:

I'll go on the picket line, that's where I belong.
For I have decided they're right and I'm wrong.
I'll go out and join them and make them my friends,
And I pray to God I can make amends. (6)

Frequently, conversion narratives, such as the one quoted above, contain religious underpinnings or references, in which the “scab” or another anti-union figure, seeks redemption. The transformed “rugged individualist” in the poem above, for instance, prays that he “can make amends.”

The underpinnings of religious conversion are particularly apparent in “A Goon Prayed,” a 1941 poem by Otis Eaton, an African-American autoworker who worked in the Ford foundry. (I describe a bit more about Eaton at the end of this section.) “A Goon Prayed” seems directed at pro-management workers who plot against unionization efforts. Loosely reflective of Biblical narratives, such as Jesus’s raising of Lazarus and Jesus’s being risen from the dead, it reads:

A Goon fell down upon one knee [sic],
Stretched both hands unto the sky;
In repentance [sic] did he pray this plea,
Dear Father, wilt thou forgive poor I.

In darkness once I smote with glee,
Even boasted I was right.
But now the dawn of day I see.
Dear Father; thou has shown me light.

I believed that they were evil men
Who had come to steal my Tomb;
But evil nay. They were gallant friends

Who sought me from my Doom.

They set me free, a man again;
And they've forgiven my past deeds.
But wilt thou Lord, Oh please avenge
Those leaders who, even yet, are showing such evil seeds.

Now they forgave me my sins
When into their fold I steal.
But try I may, night and day I Pray,
I can't forgive myself. (1)

In this poem, the goon experiences a resurrection after realizing that the interests he once battled against (presumably unionization interests), were on the side of God. At first, the goon is afraid that those who came near him had “come to steal [his] Tomb,” but in actuality, they were there to “free” him and make him “a man again” by forgiving him. In this case, those who have freed the goon vaguely overlap with the role of Jesus who resurrected Jesus in the Lazarus story (*King James* John 11.1-44). The poem's narrative, in this respect, is similar to that of many poems about scab conversions (on which I elaborate in Chapter 3).

Aside from being an example of a conversion narrative, Eaton's poem is also significant because it is one of the few surviving Depression-era UAW poems attributed to an African-American worker. Although Eaton's poem does not specifically address how race factored into the UAW's early organizing efforts, it is perhaps significant that Eaton focuses on a “goon” conversion rather than that of a “scab.” Indeed, scabs were also subjects of conversion narratives in UAW poems and songs, and perhaps no other poem or song features the conversion of a “goon.” Goons, in some instances, referred to those hired specifically to beat up unionizing workers—and thus do not seem like likely candidates for conversion. Yet, perhaps Eaton chose to depict a goon conversion, rather

than a scab conversion, because many UAW members continued to unfairly associate scabbing behavior with African-American workers, as I will elaborate in the next section, and Eaton wanted to avoid such associations. Further, the use of the word “goon” was still new among UAW members in 1941, when this poem appeared—and Eaton may have used it in an effort to assert his status as a UAW insider in a union that had not always been welcoming to Black workers.

For the remainder of this section I will describe how UAW autoworker poets and songwriters depicted a contested vision for the “insider” status of Black workers as union members more generally. Indeed, no other group of workers (and potential unionists) faced such derisive and confusing rhetoric from official UAW channels. Despite the particular need for African-American workers to organize in order to protect themselves against workplace discrimination, the UAW’s position regarding organizing Black workers was indefinite. As I will relate, the UAW’s mixed signals concerning the unionization of Black autoworkers is reproduced in mixed signals conveyed by the poems and songs that ran in the union’s mainline newspaper.

Early twentieth-century craft unions were seldom welcoming to African-Americans—either denying Black workers admittance altogether, establishing “Colored” locals to accommodate them, or supporting the wishes of white workers who refused to work under a Black supervisor (Babson 43). What’s more, a classic management tactic was to divide Black and white workers by recruiting Black workers as scabs during strikes. For instance, Chrysler recruited African Americans to undermine a Detroit strike in 1939, creating a situation where “on two occasions two hundred workers, nearly all blacks, passed through picket lines, harassed by over six thousand jeering whites”

(Barnard 158-59). Labor historian John Barnard points out that the number of recruits would not have been enough to restart production—so the intention of Chrysler management was probably to insight racist violence that would prompt the National Guard to be called in and force strikers back to work (158-59). Such experiences, as well as the labor movement’s discriminatory history, understandably left many Black workers wary of UAW organizing efforts.

Moreover, the UAW itself sent mixed signals concerning a willingness to organize African Americans. The UAW’s official line was that the union was anti-discriminatory and desired to improve opportunities for Black workers. One newspaper article in the Ford edition of the *United Automobile Worker* stated the UAW’s anti-discrimination policy in unequivocal terms: “Whether it fights economically or politically the UAW has placed the demands of the Negro workers in the forefront.” The article continues, “Against century-old prejudices among workers and against the deliberate and coldly calculated plans of automobile manufacturers to foster racial hates, the UAW has and will continue to fight unflinchingly” (“Divide and Rule, Ford Racket” 2).

However, while the UAW was officially welcoming to Black workers, and some Black leaders were elected as shop stewards and served in local leadership positions, many white unionists harbored racist beliefs that they expressed in both words and actions. Black workers, for instance, were barred from entering a Depression-era union dance at Chevrolet Gear and Axle (Babson 107). Also telling, when autoworkers began hiring and promoting African Americans to higher-skilled jobs—formerly held by mostly white workers—with the onset of WWII, many white workers complained, simply refused to work with Black workers, or even staged wildcat “hate” strikes. The most

serious of the hate strikes occurred in 1943, when 90 percent of white Packard workers struck to protest the promotion of three African-American workers. The strike also followed an “influx of southern white wartime workers,” into the plant, some of whom were said to be linked to the KKK. While the strike was condemned hardly by UAW officials, the incident reveals how virulent racism erupted in some plants even after Black workers started joining the UAW in large numbers (Barnard 192-96).

Moreover, even as the union solicited Black workers in the late Depression, in 1937 the *United Automobile Worker* published a parody titled “Classic Revisited,” which sent an altogether different message. The song parody, for which no author is listed, exaggerates African-American vernacular in the blackface minstrel tradition heard on the enormously popular *Amos ‘n’ Andy* radio program. Publishing such a parody would have clearly undermined the UAW’s rhetoric welcoming African-American workers into the union. The song’s lyrics are as follows:

I gotta gun.
You gotta gun.
All Girdler’s chill’un got guns
And when we start poppin’ at the CIO
We’ll sure enough all go to hebben.
Hebben, hebben.
Everybody’s going to pop off his gun
And we’ll all pop right into hebben! (5)

The parody mocks the African-American spiritual “You Got a Robe,” and its closely related “Goin’ to Shout All Over God’s Heaven” (Courlander 66). “You Got a Robe,” has various versions, many of which include vernacular lyrics. For instance, in the 1925 book *The Negro and His Songs: A Study of Typical Negro Songs in the South*, the spiritual begins with the lines:

You got a robe, I got a robe,

All God's chillun got a robe.
Goin' to try on my robe an' if it fits me,
Goin' to wear it all around God's heaven,
Heaven – heaven, ev'ybody goin' to heaven,
An' I'm goin' dere, too." (Odum and Johnson 97)

Aside from parodying "You Got a Robe," the lyrics reference the Memorial Day massacre, which took place on May 30, 1937, about three months prior to the parody's publication. That day, Chicago Police fired on a crowd of picketers at Republic Steel, killing ten and wounding dozens of others. The "Girdler" of the parody refers to Tom Girdler, the fierce anti-unionist who headed the steel company and who equipped his company with a huge arsenal of weapons, worth nearly \$80,000, in the years and months before the strike (Dennis 71). As Michael Dennis, author of *The Memorial Day Massacre and the Movement for Industrial Democracy*, has found, "By the time that the steelworkers went on strike, the collection included 4 Thompson machine guns, 525 revolvers, 64 rifles, 254 shotguns, and a wide assortment of clubs, mace, and ammunition. If anyone believed in class war in the 1930s, it was Tom Girdler of Republic Steel" (71). The implied assertion of this parody is that anti-CIO, pro-business interests, including Girdler, could easily co-opt African Americans by arming them with weapons and making empty appeals to their religious sensibilities.

Aside from being deeply offensive, the parody is misleading in a number of ways—the most obvious being that the vast majority of armed police involved in the Memorial Day massacre were white. Also SWOC, including seven key African-American organizers, had been successfully organizing large numbers of African-American steel workers prior to the strike—and many Black workers were among the strikers. What's more, one of the protest's *victims*, Lee Tisdale, was African American.

Tisdale had placed himself in harm's way to protect fellow protester Louis Calvano from being bludgeoned by police (Dennis 102-3, 144, 162, 164).

Aside from perhaps seeing such an overtly racist poem in the the UAW's mainline newspaper, Black workers also received anti-union messages from leaders within Detroit's African-American community. The received history is that Henry Ford shored up loyalty among African Americans by hiring far more Black workers than did other automakers in the 1920s and 1930s. He further won the support of leading clergymen in Detroit's Black community by giving money to churches and even building the parish house for St. Mathews, a prominent African-American church. Ford relied on his allies among clergy within Detroit's African-American community to recruit and vet potential workers. Due to cultural pressures brought by Detroit's elite Black leadership and loyalty to Ford, many Black autoworkers refrained from joining the UAW until 1941, when the union gained formal recognition at Ford. At that point, the tide changed dramatically, as 10,000 African-American workers from Ford joined the UAW in short order (Meier & Rudwick 3-33; Babson 42; Lewis-Colman 8; Barnard 155 and 162).

While such is a commonly told narrative of African-American involvement in the UAW, it doesn't tell the whole story. For instance, Ford did hire significantly more Black workers than did other car manufacturers; some 44 percent of Black workers in Detroit worked at the River Rouge plant. However, Black Ford workers seldom held positions outside of the most dangerous and menial positions, such as plant sanitation or working in the Rouge's steel foundries (Lewis-Colman 8; Barnard 155). As David M. Lewis-Colman noted in *Race Against Liberalism: Black Workers and the UAW in Detroit*, "Foundry jobs were among the least desirable in the plant, with workers laboring in

intense and dangerous heat, breathing in sickening fumes, pouring steel, shoveling sand, and doing other cleanup and production jobs” (8). Black workers were also among the earliest UAW members, and many indeed actively worked on unionization efforts in the years before the formation of the UAW. In the effort to organize Ford, in 1940, the UAW supported the formation of a committee specifically tasked with recruiting Black workers. The committee, with a staff of twenty-one African-American organizers, played an important role in cultivating union support among community leaders and Black workers themselves (Lewis-Colman 9-10).

Otis Eaton, the poet who wrote “A Goon Prayed,” referenced above, was definitely active in the UAW by 1941—and perhaps earlier. Eaton was associate editor of the *Spotlight*, the UAW newspaper directed toward Ford foundry workers specifically. In addition to publishing several poems in the *Spotlite*, Eaton also wrote a notice outlining the union’s goals. These included building “[a] progressive and militant union,” getting “[a] Union Label on Every Ford Car,” and “[t]he biggest Christmas Bonus in the Auto Industry” (“Our Aims” 4). While Eaton’s surviving poetry and prose do not explicitly reference race, Eaton’s poem “The General Council” critiques the pretense of union leaders who call for unity, but then undermine such rhetoric with their actions. The poem reads:

I saw a group of labor’s men,
Legislating for there [sic] kin.
It was an inspiring sight, to see
Them lobby and trade, and hear their repartee.

They motioned in order, and out of it;
Now this group would resolve,
While this gang was playing politics
Still another; a problem solve.

The left and right and reaction was there,
And while they all cried "UNITY"
Each gathered "Seperately" [sic] to do his share of
Representing you and me. (2)

Eaton's poem reflects an insider's knowledge of union politics, and it offers a healthy critique of the union's tendency to claim "unity" while hypocritically dividing itself into factions. (As such, it easily fits into the designation, "Poems critical of UAW members and organizers" described in the next section.) As an African-American UAW member, aware of the union's history, Eaton was perhaps particularly attuned to the hypocrisy of leaders who call for unity among all workers, but also allowed discrimination and division within its ranks.

While union rhetoric toward Black workers could be perplexing, the UAW also included white activists who promoted the UAW's effort to recruit Black workers and support their specific concerns. Marlatt wrote two poems for the *United Automobile Worker* specifically addressing racism. One, a first-person narrative from the perspective of a Black man who has been lynched, begins: "I died, / Not in a bed surrounded by love, / But in a dark swamp at the hands of a mob" (7). In the other poem, which begins "I take your hand, my black brother," Marlatt, writing from the point of view of a white union member, expresses a sense of union brotherhood and shared experience with African-American workers. In this poem, Marlatt conveys a conviction that his fate and that of his "black brother" are economically interdependent. The poem reads:

I take your hand, my black brother,
And lift you up that I too may rise;
I cannot be free as long as you are bound,
Nor can I sing while you are weeping,
My back, too, is bent under your burdens,
And I stumble beside you when your pain is long;
I take your hand, my black brother,

And ask your faith that I too may live,
For we are builders, you and I,
Our sweat, our strength, our blood goes into the world's work,
I take your hand, my black brother,
And I pray that you'll take mine, for we are one. (7)

In this dramatic and somewhat romantic poem, the white speaker claims that his own status cannot improve if that of his “black brother” remains degraded. The poem’s purpose is clearly to advocate for solidarity among workers across racial lines in order to improve the status of all workers—and undermine efforts by owners to divide workers along racial lines. Indeed, the poem’s message of inter-racial unity among workers remains crucial for achieving gains against oppressive working conditions. Moreover, the poem acknowledges that Black workers faced a particular form of oppression that extended much beyond that faced by white workers; the poem, for instance, refers to the “black brother” as “weeping” and to the status of African-American workers as continuing to be “bound”—suggesting that a state of quasi-slavery continued for Black workers under the capitalist system. In another sense, Marlatt uses a discourse of solidarity in a way that is meant to appeal to white workers, even as he addresses Black workers specifically. For example, his line “I cannot be free as long as you are bound”—in addition to acknowledging the oppression of Black workers—also serves to inform white workers why it is in their own self-interest to unite across racial lines.

This poem offers a stark contrast to the more usual way that white UAW poets of the Depression era (either inadvertently or otherwise) subtly referenced racial oppression—by undermining differences between their own experiences and those of enslaved African-Americans by referring to workers in general as “slaves.” For instance,

the poem “A Ford Slave,” submitted to the West Side Conveyor Oct. 5, 1937, attributed to a “A Canadian Ford Worker,” includes the lines:

By organizing men
We’ll [sic] stop it then—

The Fordism plan
Of exploiting man
For profit and power
From slaves by the hour. (np)

Similarly, the poem “To Henry Ford,” submitted by Mrs. Cora Dukes of Kansas City includes the lines:

These good men who have slaved for you,
Around fifteen years or more,
Are facing a harder winter
With the wolf close to their door. (4)

Yet another poem, this one by Peter McShane of Local 174, includes the lines “The rich have fatter, richer grown, / The masses still in slavery moan” as well as the lines:

The upper crust my rant and rave,
Call us radical and red,
Must we be their social slave
While they curl in silky bed? (7)

In his widely referenced book *Wages of Whiteness*, historian David R. Roediger traces the history of the related terms “white slavery” and “wage slavery” back to the mid-Antebellum period; as he contends, such terms were long used by social commentators and workers themselves to draw comparisons (or further distinctions) between the injustices suffered by white northern factory workers and Southern Black slaves. While the comparison was neither appropriate nor accurate, Roediger contends that using such language was tempting for nineteenth-century northern labor activists, given the prevalence of the ongoing controversy over slavery.²¹ While the term “white slavery”

does not appear in UAW poetry or songs of the Depression, these songs and poems continue to refer to mostly white workers as “slaves,” showing that the term continued to be in use into the early twentieth century.

Although Marlatt’s poem might ultimately be read as an appeal to white workers to support Black workers as a means of achieving white workers’ own interests, his poetry nonetheless prompted threats from racist readers. In a follow-up column, he noted that in response to his poems, he “received [...] a letter, printed and unsigned, with a very thinly veiled threat against me if I continued my line of writing” (“Nuts and Bolts” of 17 Dec. 1938, 7). He concluded his column with an admonishment against the anonymous perpetrator, appealing to Christianity: “I wonder if this unsigned contributor gone to church, does he believe in the words of Christ? Christianity is based on love of thy neighbor. There is no reservation to confine your love to your white neighbor” (7). In “Lilacs,” Marlatt included more about the incident, noting that he received far more letters than the one he mentioned in his column:

It [...] brought me into conflict with the anti-black proponents and earned me the title of “Nigger-lover”, the form of address on a great deal of the mail I received from the more violent racist. These were often accompanied by threats which included “tarring and feathering” and “hanging [him] from a lamp post.” (76).

As Marlatt relayed, Detroit was awash in “racial tensions” during the late Depression, brought on “by the heavy influx of southern workers into the auto plants, the growth of the Ku Klux Klan, Black Legion and similar hate-inspired organizations, and the deliberate agitation of secret agents of the automobile companies as a union busting technique” (77). While many white workers in the UAW welcomed Black workers into the UAW “brotherhood,” the reaction toward Marlatt’s poems, and the *United Automobile Worker*’s inclusion of the “You Got a Robe,” reveal the degree of racism and

hostility that African-American workers continued to face from a union that purported to represent all autoworkers.

Poems critical of UAW members and organizers

The final type of poems I will discuss in this chapter are those that can be read as critical of other union members. In some sense, these poems serve as a cynical rejoinder to the poems of optimistic boosterism so common in the early days of the UAW. As the realities of large-scale unionization, international union bureaucracy, and factionalism were realized, the poems became more factional, as well. Beginning in 1939, workers wrote poems reflecting the tension within the UAW and illustrating the union's internal struggle to achieve the lofty—and often elusive—goal of solidarity for themselves. (I give this theme more depth in Chapter 5, which concerns poems regarding the factionalism over UAW President Homer Martin's resignation.)

Exhaustion and cynicism with the idealism and boosterism that defined the early sit-down period of 1937 is apparent in the 1939 poem "Picketing – A Song," by Moon Mullins of Local 174. The poem begins with the telling word, "Wishing" in parentheses. It reads:

Picketing will make it so—
Just keep on picketing and cares will go.
The CIO is here to stay;
It's no mistake—
Pickets is [sic] all we need to negotiate.

The pickets in time will part—
Just keep on picketing with all your heart.
So if you picket long enough—
Picket strong enough—
The boss will learn to know
Picketing will make it so. (4)

In this poem, the line, “The CIO is here to stay,” could easily have come from a poem purporting optimistic boosterism. However, other lines in the poem, including “Just keep on picketing and cares will go,” are simply *too* optimistic to be read as anything but sarcastic. Moreover, Mullins shows himself to be a well-versed in autoworker poems and songs when he cleverly mimics the straightforward rhyme scheme and simple language of countless poems and songs of optimistic boosterism written in support of strikes. Simultaneously, he exposes the claims of such poems and songs as naïve by exaggerating their hopeful theses.

A similar cynicism can be found in “Solidarity—But,” by Thomas Singer, which ran in the *United Automobile Worker* the following month. Rather than weakly and sarcastically parroting wishful boosterism, as in Mullins’s poem, Singer, in a moment of introspection, takes aim at unionists’ inauthentic calls for solidarity. The poem reads:

They sing “Solidarity Forever, For the union makes us strong.”
And I often try to figure out whether they’re right or wrong.
Frankly speaking, I would say they’re right in one sense of the word,
But some don’t know what Solidarity means—perhaps they’ve never heard.
And as for the union making us strong, well, of course there’s a lot in that.
But in the union, like every place else, we now and then meet a rat.
And to rats Solidarity means not a thing, to them it is merely a word,
But pay no attention to this verse; I don’t know I only heard. (7)

The speaker seems doubtful about the solidarity and future of the union—a standpoint rarely taken so strongly in UAW poems. In this case, Singer takes direct aim at rats to whom “Solidarity means not a thing.” Notably, in this short poem, Singer offers two forms of meta-commentary. In the beginning of the poem, he comments on the hypocrisy that might hide behind boosterish songs such as “Solidarity Forever,” telling the reader not to trust appearances. Then, in the final line, Singer moves outside the poem itself advising the reader to “pay no attention to this verse; I don’t know I only heard.” This last

line, in particular, resonates on several levels. In one respect, it reminds the reader to be weary of versified sloganeering more generally. On another level, the line mirrors language related to rats within the workplace. Rats, after all, report on what they “only heard” to the bosses—and this seems to be the resonance that Singer intended. At the same time, workers oftentimes only heard about the activities of rats through the workplace rumor mill. Ultimately, this poem reflects the deceitfulness of rats more generally. The message of the poem is that you can’t trust what you hear—in songs or poems or rumors. And the subterfuge for which rats are responsible make it difficult to trust in lofty ideals of solidarity championed by the union, as its membership seeks to become something larger than the sum of its parts.

In this chapter, I have provided an overview of the sorts of poems and songs that UAW poets and songwriters composed in the late Depression. I briefly described the circumstances leading to the UAW’s formation and how the union circulated poems and songs. I profiled two UAW poets, Clayton Fountain and Ralph Marlatt, showing how their biographies and political leanings influenced the poetry they composed. I argued that the poetry and songs of UAW autoworkers in the Depression era reflect the “remasculinization” of industrial workers more generally, as the deskilling of craft positions undermined the identify formations of male workers rooted in the nineteenth-century craft tradition. I further described how autoworker poems and songs can be divided into a number of types. The first are grounded in vigorous self-assertion. The second concern the status of union insiders and outsiders, using a specialized discourse to assert the “brotherhood” of rank-and-file unionists and to call into question the motives of scabs, goons, stool pigeons, and other anti-union figures. I also described how poems

and songs regarding African Americans were indicative of the UAW's mixed signals toward Black autoworkers more generally. Finally, I showed that UAW poets and songwriters toward the end of the Depression era sometimes called the union's earlier optimism into question, as on-the-ground factionalization challenged idealistic notions of a united union brotherhood. In the next chapter, I will describe how women autoworkers and the female relatives of autoworkers—who were members of the union's auxiliary—also wrote poems and songs for UAW publications. While these songs and poems, in some cases, reaffirm the union's overall concern for masculine strength and knowledge, they also introduce alternative ways of promoting the unionization effort and class-consciousness. Further, I show how poems by female autoworkers, in particular, intertwine both the discourses of masculine brotherhood and the “helper” discourse of UAW Women's Auxiliaries.

CHAPTER 2

POEMS BY WOMEN IN THE UAW'S EARLY FORMATION

By and large, the poems and songs that appeared in United Auto Worker publications of the Depression were written by men to appeal men. They addressed readers uniformly as “boys” or “men” and called for a union “brotherhood.” For instance, the song poem “REO Strike Song,” a parody of “Tramp Tramp Tramp, The Boys are Marching,” which appeared in the *Lansing Auto Worker* in 1937, rather typically begins:

Strike! Strike! Strike! for higher wages
Working men will have their day
Every man will join the fight
'Till we make the REO right
We are out to win the Union Way. (2)

Nonetheless, while men wrote the vast majority of UAW poems and songs, and workers were most often referred to with male pronouns, women autoworkers and women's auxiliary members also submitted their own poems and songs to UAW publications. While about ten songs and poems by women autoworkers from this era survive, songs and poems by women auxiliary members number more than twenty. Poems and songs by both groups of UAW women acknowledge their own contributions to strikes and other protest actions. For instance, the lively “Women's Theme Song,” sung to the tune of “Marching through Georgia” celebrates contributions by both men and women to the unionization struggle. It includes lines such as:

The women got together and they formed a might throng,
Every worker's wife and mom and sister will belong,
They will fight beside the men to help the cause along,
Shouting the Union forever! (3)

In this chapter, I will discuss poems and songs by both women autoworkers and UAW women's auxiliary members. In particular, I draw upon the work of feminist labor historians to contextualize poems and songs printed in archival newspapers and bulletins. As this chapter will demonstrate, unlike the vast majority of poems by men, most poems by organizing women appeal specifically to women, often by acknowledging the unique contributions of both sexes to the labor movement as well as evoking domestic themes and metaphors to address themes of class-consciousness. Wives of autoworkers, in particular, wrote about the challenges of maintaining family finances—and thus relayed first-hand accounts of how grueling working conditions and job uncertainty for men had a direct effect on women's lives and economic security.

Notable in this body of work are three songs that mention *women working in factories*. As is apparent in these poems, many UAW women—including both working women and auxiliary members—generally interpellated the wider masculinized ethos and aesthetics of the Depression-era labor and Popular Front movements; they depicted *men* as workers and union members—and *women* as their enthusiastic supporters, usually in women's auxiliaries (See Faue). In general, UAW women's representations of themselves conform to this pattern. However, as I argue in this chapter, some of the very few references to women autoworkers in UAW publications of this era appeared in poems and songs by women workers themselves. As such, these poems and songs—rare as they were—constitute the only creative representations of unionized women that female autoworkers would have seen in newspapers from the union that represented them.

In this chapter, I address the notion that the songs and poems UAW women wrote were not feminist in sensibility. Although women autoworkers, as well as the wives of autoworkers, faced patriarchal attitudes by male foremen or their husbands at home, respectively, poems by these women much more often promoted themes of class-consciousness than overt themes of feminism. Indeed, this was the finding of Ivan Greenberg, whose study of Depression-era poems by CIO participants spans across industries.²² While I agree with Greenberg that songs and poems by woman activists did not promote a specifically feminist perspective, I argue that they nevertheless constituted an important aspect of material culture in support of the unionization of women autoworkers and women's auxiliary members. Given the historical context of these women and the sexist attitudes that were prevalent in the labor movement of the Depression, the *writing* of poems that appeal specifically to women disrupted pervasive cultural expectations for the behavior of women, even if the poems focused on themes of class-consciousness rather than on women's liberation. Moreover, the themes of domesticity and solidarity among union women apparent in many songs and poems by women stand in sharp contrast to the pervasive masculine ethos of UAW publications.

In this chapter, I historically contextualize examples of poems and songs printed in UAW publications and bulletins by describing the events and cultural influences that inspired them. I have combined poems by women autoworkers and UAW women's auxiliary members in this chapter because these poems overlap in theme, although—as I will describe—the differences between poems written by each of these groups are also illuminating. Studying these songs and poems separately from those by men helps to

elucidate how gender roles were represented during the Depression-era labor movement more generally.

Women autoworkers in the late Depression

The American automotive industry during the Great Depression was overwhelmingly male dominated. However, women autoworkers were hardly uncommon, comprising between 7 and 9 percent of the automotive laborers and operatives in the 1930s, with the percentage reaching 10.5 percent (or more than 30,000 women autoworkers) by 1940 (Barnard 103, Gabin 10, Milkman 32). The majority of women in the auto industry worked in jobs related to small parts assembly and manufacturer, the sewing of upholstery, trims jobs, and inspection (Gabin 11, Barnard 103, Meyerowitz 238). Individual parts manufacturing plants, in particular, employed large numbers of women. In Flint, for example, roughly half of the 4,900 workers at A.C. Spark Plug, a parts-producing plant owned by General Motors, were female (Fine 119, Gabin 20). General Motors' Ternstedt plant on Detroit's West Side, employed some 12,000 workers, of whom about half were women (Barnard 104, Meyerowitz 239).

These wage-earning women, in general, had even more reason to unionize than their male counterparts. Historically, women working in automotive plants have been more heavily at the mercy of their employers than have men; this is in part because women were often hired specifically to fill unskilled jobs at low wages and had no opportunity for advancement (Kessler-Harris, *Out* 94). Women autoworkers also received much lower wages than their relatively well-paid male counter-parts. Women working in auto-industry factories in 1932 earned 36 cents per hour, or not much more than half of the 64 cents paid to men. (Gabin 13; U.S. Dept. of Labor. Bureau of Labor Statistics,

“Wages and Hours” 1369).²³ By 1940, after the UAW had been in existence for about five years, the outlook of women working in auto plants had improved, but not entirely. In auto-body and assembly plants, women made only 74 percent of what male workers did—or 72 cents per hour, compared to 97 cents for men. Men also received more for doing the same work. For instance, female sewing-machine operators received 74 cents per hour, while male sewing-machine operators received nine cents more. (Gabin 29; U.S. Dept. of Labor. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Wage Structure” 300-301, 303). Not only did women endure low pay, they also faced sexual harassment in the workplace, sometimes having to choose between losing a job or tolerating a foreman’s advances (Gabin 12). Married women during the Depression faced special discrimination, as cultural attitudes stipulated that wage-earning women were not only neglecting their families, but also stealing jobs from unemployed men. In the mid-1930s this stance was pervasive; 82 percent of Americans participating in a 1936 Gallup poll “believed that employers should discriminate against married women” (Milkman 28).

Analysis by Marxist feminist social scientist Silvia Federici is helpful for understanding why such mindsets were pervasive into the early twentieth century. As Federici explains in *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (2004), attitudes about women workers can be traced back to the European medieval era, when peasants were displaced from feudal farming by land enclosure—and both men and women increasingly found work in urban areas. Early in this transition period, women worked in the craft trades, including, according to Federici, “occupations that later would be considered male jobs” (31). As she elaborates, “In medieval towns, women worked as smiths, butchers, bakers, candlestick makers, hat-makers, ale brewers,

wool-carders, and retailers. [...] In England, seventy-two of eighty-five guilds included women among their members. Some guilds, including silk-making, were dominated by them; in others, female employment was as high as that of men” (31).

But over the early Modern period and into the seventeenth century, this acceptance of wage-earning women in craft trades shifted dramatically. As the influence of capitalism grew, craftsmen grew resentful of craftswomen and began refusing to work with them, likely because women earned lower wages than men earned, undercutting their pay (Federici 95). At the same time, according to Federici, craftsmen “were also interested in limiting women to domestic work” because subjugating women to un-paid domestic work served to support the daily needs of male workers (96). Limiting women to domestic work both illegitimatized their labor and ensured the male workforce was cooked for and cared for—and well as safeguarded the reproduction of the labor force. In Federici’s words, “With their expulsion from the crafts and the devaluation of reproductive labor[,] poverty became feminized, and to enforce men’s ‘primary appropriation’ of women’s labor, a new patriarchal order was constructed, reducing women to a double dependence: on employers and on men” (97). As Federici further claims, this reduction in the status of women eventually resulted in the role of women as economically dependent housewives in the nineteenth century—and fed into the attitude that women’s proper place was in the home (75).

Even as this mindset persisted into the early twentieth century, married women found themselves—especially by the 1930s—in situations of economic desperation as their husbands struggled to find work. Increasingly, women themselves sought wage-paying work, either to supplement their husbands’ unsteady or low income, or to support

a family without a male breadwinner. As a result, motor-vehicle plants during this era employed more married women than single (Gabin 36-8; Strom 361-3; Kessler-Harris, *Out* 251-259; Milkman 28-33).

While the auto industry employed thousands of women workers, in its formative years the UAW made little effort to appeal them specifically. The union officially supported equal pay for men and women doing the same work, but the purpose of this stance was aimed more toward protecting jobs for men (so they would not be replaced by low-wage women workers) than increasing pay for women. As a result, work for men and women in the auto industry remained overwhelmingly separated—with women continuing to fill the lowest paying “female” jobs (Milkman 27, 31). Another reason that the UAW did not reach out to more women rested on the common opinion among both male and female organizers that women were challenging to organize. As this argument went, women were more heavily focused on domestic activities than concerns of the workplace. They were also deemed to be, by and large, temporary employees who were not primary breadwinners for their families and therefore less interested in organizing (Bernard 104; Lichtenstein, *Dangerous* 97; Meyerowitz 242; Kessler-Harris, *Out* 92-93).

Despite this mythology, the 1930s is replete with examples of woman participating in organized labor. In 1933 and 1934 alone, some 285,000 women participated in strike actions. Women, for instance, comprised most of the 45,000 strikers who walked out of Philadelphia dress factories in 1933 and were prominent in the massive textile strike the following year (Strom 363-4, U.S. Dept. of Labor, Women’s Bureau 32). The Amalgamated Clothing Workers, as well as the International Ladies Garment Workers Union staged general strikes in New York and Connecticut. Female

tobacco workers, hosier workers, radio workers, office workers, hotel workers, waitresses, and department store clerks were among those who took part in the massive labor movement of the 1930s. (Strom 634-5, U.S. Dept. of Labor. Women's Bureau 23). Even in the auto industry, prior to the formation of the UAW, a third of the 6,000 workers who struck Detroit's notorious Briggs Manufacturing plant in 1933, winning better pay, were women (Strom 363).

The UAW eventually did organize General Motors' Ternstedt plant, in spite of its significant female workforce and resistance from union officials. It did so, in part, because UAW Polish-language organizer Stanley Nowak, who had experience organizing Detroit female cigar makers, insisted on taking up the challenge (Gabin 19, Meyerowitz 241-42). At the time, Ternstedt was one of the holdouts when it came to recognizing the UAW's first contract with GM as legitimate (Meyerowitz 248). Nowak was eventually successful not only in organizing Ternstedt employees, but also in convincing its largely female workforce to stage an effective slow-down against the division (Meyerowitz 249-50). Despite this and other small-scale UAW successes, organizing women workers and addressing their particular grievances was never a sustained effort from the union. Moreover, while women joined the UAW during the 1930s, they very rarely advanced to higher positions of influence (Gabin 21-25).

Given the status of women workers in the UAW and the masculine ethos of the UAW more generally (as shown in Chapter 1), it is perhaps not surprising that women autoworkers wrote poems that were indistinguishable from those by men for male workers. For example, in 1939, as more women were employed in the auto industry than ever before, Mary F. Poliuto, of Local 165, wrote a poem titled "The Union's In" that

refers to union members as “men” and the union itself as a “brotherhood.” The speaker urges workers to put “[a]ll shoulders to the helm”—encouraging solidarity by metaphorically urging them to act in unison as masculine shipmates:

Men, you who work for the common good
Ever swear by our brotherhood.
Raise your voice, in the union’s name
If there’s certain truth in the thing you claim.
Carry on as one, and we’re sure to win
All shoulders to the helm, for the union’s in!

Appealing to workers’ masculinity is perhaps a purely rhetorical decision. Men, after all, were the primary readers of the *United Automobile Worker*, where this poem appeared, and comprised most of the UAW (although the percentage is impossible to determine). However, given her historical and cultural context as a women autoworker, Poliuto may have had difficulty imagining what solidarity among women laborers would look like or how it would be represented.

As Elizabeth Faue demonstrates in her analysis of publications from the early twentieth century Minneapolis labor movement as well as national labor publications, pro-union iconography of the Depression era portrays workers as uniformly male and union members as hyper-masculine, brawny figures defeating “effete” capitalists, scabs, and other enemies of labor. In *Community of Suffering and Struggle: Men, Women, and the Labor Movement in Minneapolis, 1915-1945*, Faue writes that depictions of working women are entirely missing from labor press cartoons (76). She found that this was the case even when male cartoonists depicted specific strikes in which women participated in great numbers and played important roles, such as the great textile strike of 1934 (76-8). At the same time, women auxiliary members *are* depicted in labor cartoons, but they appear as matronly figures, sacrificing themselves for the sake of their husbands’

struggles (83). While working women are likewise mostly absent from poems and songs by women of the UAW, the women who do appear are usually either auxiliary members, female autoworkers supporting male autoworkers, or women in a domestic role. The exceptions, as I will describe, make very brief mentions of women actually working. However, these are also a hybrid type of song-poem, combining elements of autoworker ethos with the style of rallying support poems and songs written by UAW women's auxiliary members. In the next section, I will describe UAW women's auxiliaries of the 1930s, as well as the songs they sang. In the following section, I will describe how women autoworkers seem to have borrowed from the rallying style of women's auxiliary members to create their own rallying form—to promote their *own* interests.

UAW Women's Auxiliaries and Emergency Brigades

While the UAW did little to specifically recruit female autoworkers in the 1930s, women's auxiliaries were seen as an important subsidiary of the greater organization. This importance is born out in UAW publications, which include frequent recruitment notices for women's auxiliaries, space for women's auxiliary news, and even expressions of gratitude toward auxiliary members from male unionists for contributions to sit-down strikes and other UAW activities. For example, a notice acknowledging the contributions of women's auxiliaries in Cleveland that ran in the *United Automobile Worker* on December 6, 1939 read: "The strong union feeling among the wives and daughters of Cleveland auto workers has been of the utmost assistance during strikes and is making itself felt in other activities of the locals ("Women's Auxiliaries" 2).²⁴ While such notices acknowledging the contributions of auxiliary members were common, similar notices acknowledging unionizing women were all but nonexistent.

The difference between attitudes toward women workers and women auxiliary members is due, in part, to differences between how women workers and stay-at-home wives were perceived in the labor movement more generally. As Strom observes, “The image of the woman standing behind her man and his job became a sentimental theme in union rhetoric, while the working woman was conspicuously absent” (365). The trope of the woman backing her man is apparent in poetry and songs by auxiliary members, as well as in interviews with auxiliary members. Nevertheless, some women hoped to transform women’s auxiliaries into permanent organizations that would promote larger concerns of women and sometimes received assistance toward this goal from Communist Party organizers (Strom 366). Although this transformation never developed fully, many women within CIO women’s auxiliaries, in Strom’s words, “clearly anticipated the larger issues their organizing of women had raised” (366).

If women autoworkers were subjected to low pay and sexual harassment, life wasn’t particularly easy for the stay-at-home wives of autoworkers either. Wives were oftentimes isolated, raising their children and managing a household as their husbands went off to work. Husbands who worked long hours on ever-faster-moving assembly lines came home exhausted and frazzled, and this led to tensions at home. “My husband had a hard job,” recalled Mary Handa, who was married to a Fisher No. 2 wet sander, in an interview. “He never really enjoyed his family. Never enjoyed his home because he was just too tired after working twelve, fourteen hours for four dollars a day” (4). Many women complained about their husbands unwinding from grueling work by drinking at local establishments, and thus wasting precious family income (*With Babies and Banners*).

The most famous of the UAW's many women's auxiliary organizations was formed in Flint during the 1936-37 sit-down strike. This auxiliary is particularly well known because members also comprised the Women's Emergency Brigade, members of which fought on the picket lines and memorably broke windows after police tear gassed sit-downers in one of the GM plants. The organization was later featured in the 1979 documentary film *With Babies and Banners*. With their red armbands and berets, these women identified as a mobile task force, prepared to serve in emergency situations either in Flint or any other city where assistance with UAW-organizing efforts was needed. "If anything came up they would get ahold of us right away and we was there," recalled member Mary Handa with pride, in an interview decades later. "If they needed work in the kitchen, we was there. If we had to go picket anyplace, we was there. They could always count on us. See, we was there" (5). The formation of the Emergency Brigade in Flint inspired women in other cities, including Cleveland, Toledo, and Detroit, to form their own brigades (Fine 201).

United Auto Worker women's auxiliaries in Flint and elsewhere were typically organized early on in a local's formation, as the wives, "sweethearts," mothers, sisters, and daughters of strikers sought a way to contribute (Barnard 103). Men generally assumed that the women would work in strike kitchens supplying sit-downers with the massive amount of food that they required each day; many women many did this. But kitchen work did not suit all of the women, and many found their calling marching on the picket line, organizing speakers and classes for women, and arranging childcare for fellow auxiliary members. They also were "chiselers" or those who asked farmers and others for food to feed the strikers. And they visited the families of strikers to offer news

from the strike or any kind of assistance they could. Women in Flint even participated in a living newspaper performance by Mary Heaton Vorse and Josephine Kraus titled “The Strike Marches On” (Barnard 103; Yeghissian 35-7; Bisson 7-9; Dorothy and Henry Kraus; Dollinger and Dollinger 131; *With Babies and Banners*).

Like women autoworkers, auxiliary members wrote rallying poems in the voice of male workers; these were poems that could be lent to the plight of husbands, brothers, fathers, and sons who worked in the auto industry. For instance, the poem, “You Can’t Stop Us from Fighting,” by Hetty Sanderson, of Auxiliary 10 in Flint, refers to family members from the point of view of male workers: “You can take away food and shelter, it’s true / From our wives and kiddies too / But you can’t stop us from fighting” (6). More frequently than poems and songs in the voices of men, however, the rallying poems and songs of auxiliary members were either about women or appealed to women specifically. Such songs and poems stood in contrast to those by male autoworkers about the contributions of women. For instance, an anonymous poem, likely by a male autoworker, that ran in the *Hudson News* strike bulletin on April 2, 1937 titled “The Girls of the U.A.W.” purports to be a poem praising women’s involvement in a sit-down strike. However, the male writer presents women in a wholly subservient position—rather than actors in their own right. The poem reads:

Here’s to our girls, God Bless them
They’re full of pep and dash
See how they greet us with a smile
When serving fish, steak, or hash.

They just give us food and courage
Just fill us full of fight
We know they’ll stand behind us
Be the skies dark or bright.

Some short, some tall, some fat, some slim,
But we love them every one
For they all to us are beautiful
With the beauty of work well done.

From such women came the people
In the good old U.S.A.
We know we can't repay them
But the Great God will some day. (Girls of the U.A.W. 1)

Women in this poem are praised for offering encouragement and inspiration for male workers. The poet emphasizes their supportive roles as cooks and mothers as well as their inspirational and practical usefulness to men involved in a struggle for workers' rights. Given that this poem was written in a strike context, we can see how the role of protesting women could be normalized by emphasizing their contributions as caretakers for the men; feeding the men emerges as a natural extension of women's usual domestic duty of cooking at home.

Federici's analysis of domestic work as unpaid labor supporting working men and the reproduction of the labor force is helpful for understanding the patriarchal ethos of this poem. As Federici contends, limiting women to unpaid domestic labor made such work both "invisible" as well as *accessible* to all men (75, 97). As she writes, "in the new organization of work *every woman (other than those privatized by bourgeois men) became a communal good*, for once women's activities were defined as non-work, women's labor began to appear as a natural resource, available to all, no less than the air we breathe or the water we drink" (97). Given Federici's cultural analysis, the lines, "We know we can't repay them, / But the Great God will some day," take on a new significance. In this poem, the very real inability of husbands to repay their wives for their domestic labor under the patriarchal capitalist system carries over into the strike

setting. Just as a wife can never be properly repaid for her domestic work at home, she can also never be repaid for her role as cook and inspiration for picketers involved in struggle. The idea that women can never be repaid (other than by “the great God”) for serving male strikers normalized and feminized women’s contributions as protesters, even as these women took the bold steps of emerging from their homes and challenging industrial authority—and even sporting arm bands and carrying clubs.

This normalization and feminization of female protest actions is something that historian Timothy P. Lynch, in his book *Strike Songs of the Depression*, pinpoints in songs specifically written by auxiliary members in Flint. As he notes, family references far more often appear in songs sung by women (as opposed to those sung by men) during the Flint sit-down. Men, he notes, did not make similar references to fatherhood or their roles providing financial support to families—instead singing more often of fellowship among male workers (109-12). As he notes, songs by auxiliary members reflected how auxiliary members participated in strikes by carrying out “traditional responsibilities in new ways” (110). For auxiliary women, writes Lynch, “[s]upporting the strikers was understood simply as an extension of their familiar roles and responsibilities” (112).

I propose that at least some auxiliary women saw their roles as being far less traditional. For instance, in contrast to how women are portrayed in “The Girls of the U.A.W.,” women auxiliary members represented themselves as proudly united with men in struggle for workers’ rights. This was the case for many songs, in particular. Singing was a persistent pastime of auxiliary women and the Emergency Brigades (as it was for the sit-down strikers). For instance, the Women’s Emergency Brigade in Flint often stood in front of the occupied factories in a gesture of good will, singing for the sit-down

strikers. (Vorse 7; Dorothy and Henry Kraus n.p.; Bisson 7). These women carried a book of mimeographed songs with a red cover printed with the title *EB Songs*. Songs inside included several parodies written by male sit-downers that were previously published in the *Flint Auto Worker* and the *United Automobile Worker* as well as “Soup Song,” and “Sit Down,” written by labor attorney Maurice Sugar. While most of the songs are written from the perspective of male sit-downers, auxiliary and Emergency Brigade members are specifically mentioned in several of the songs and some are attributed to women themselves.

Rather than portraying women in the strike kitchen—where many women indeed lent a hand—the most potent songs emphasize the role of women “fighting” in solidarity with men. For example, “The Worker’s Cry of Freedom,” sung to the tune of “Marching through Georgia,” which I quoted above, insists that women “will fight beside the men to help the cause along / Shouting the Union forever!” (*EB Songbook* n.p.) The book also contains chants, including one just for the Emergency Brigade:

We’re the wives, we’re the mothers
Of our fighting Union brothers.
We’ll fight for our kith and kin,
And when we fight, we fight to win.
Rah! Rah! Rah!

Given that the women in Flint actually did break windows, wear military-style garb, and clash with police on the picket line, the word “fight” in such chants and poems is far from metaphorical. While some women may have thought of their roles in strikes as an extension of their domestic duties at home, many women also clearly considered themselves to be—quite literally—protecting the striking men. Read in context, these chants articulate their very real intentions to battle police. Evidence of the determination

to fight appears in oral histories of the most militant of the Flint Emergency Brigade members, including Nellie Bisson, a young activist who became involved with the Brigade after she was fired from A.C. Spark Plug for union activities. Describing the need for the Emergency Brigade, Bisson later told an interviewer:

[W]e saw that there was such a need for women that would gladly give their life, you might say, because that is practically what they asked us to do. We faced tear gas and we faced rocks and we faced police and we faced National Guard and General Motors goons and everybody else. So, we set up the Women's Emergency Brigade... (1).

Indeed, the context in which these songs were sung also informed what they meant to those who sang them. As William Roy contends in *Reds, Whites, and Blues: Social Movements, Folk Music, and Race in the United States*, studying the surface meaning of a song is not enough to understand how that song functioned in practice, given that “music is fundamentally social” (2). As he writes, “Accounts and perspectives that focus solely on textual meaning or sonic qualities disregard a profound sociological dimension of how music operates in social interaction” (2). Thus, when reading the lyrics of songs, poems, and chants by UAW women and auxiliary members, we should consider that both the wives of autoworkers and women autoworkers themselves sang and circulated songs and poems within the context of a sometimes violently fought social movement. With the act of singing songs, performing chants, and circulating poems as part of a larger body of activities, which sometimes even involved physical confrontation and braking windows, women challenged both capitalist hegemony and pervasive assumptions for how women should behave. For the “fighting” Brigade members, in particular, the role they played, and the way they thought of themselves, very definitely

pushed the boundaries of traditional, domestically focused femininity. Their songs and chats played an important role in unifying them for these actions.

Aside from asserting the determination of women to fight, poems, songs, and chants by women's auxiliary members were often exceptionally positive and rife with aphorism. Indeed, having a positive and cheerful attitude seems to have been one characteristic of a "good" sister in the union. Women's auxiliary members wrote among the most enthusiastic and unequivocally positive poems and song lyrics for the UAW's effort. For example, the poem "Be a Booster," by Exley Nolan of Auxiliary 29 in Toledo begins with the exuberant lines:

Boost your union, boost your friend,
Boost your auxiliary that you attend,
Boost the street on which you're dwelling,
Boost the goods with union labeling,
Boost the people 'rond about you,
They can get along without you,
But success will quicker find them
If they know that you're behind them. (2)

Similarly, a poem by Ann Horb of Auxiliary 38 in Saginaw, encourages positive thinking as a means for achieving solidarity among women, appealing to their roles as "wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters."

Come, girls, get in line and show them you're swell.
Let's sing, let us cheer, and be very glad
For we belong to the Auxiliary.
For our men we shall fight
With all our might.

Come, join the ranks of womanhood,
The Auxiliary will do you good
You'll learn some tricks that are mighty fine.
Come, join our ranks and get in line,
Wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters,
We take you all, so some and join.
Come on girls, step right in line. (7)

Greenberg refers to this sort of rallying poem as a “praise poem.” As Greenberg notes, praise poems are so rooted in authentic feeling that they do not really meet the criteria for “propaganda.” They “express genuine enthusiasm for a new institution” and “extoll the virtues of unionism” long denied industrial employees (428). Given the above poems and many others like them, I agree with this assessment. One imagines that Nolan’s and Horb’s verses came from a genuine overflow of good feeling toward auxiliary sisters and their united effort.

Rallying poems by women autoworkers

As I described in Chapter 1, male autoworkers also wrote rallying poems and songs, although they were not as uniformly boosterish as those by auxiliary members—and they much more often used union slang (referring to “rats,” “scabs,” etc.) to address grievances specific to the workplace. Interestingly, the rallying songs by UAW women autoworkers appear to be a hybrid of those by women’s auxiliary members and those by male autoworkers. They include both boosterish rallying cries and union slang, and they reference workplace grievances (albeit briefly) with firsthand authority.

Take, for example, a song parody composed by women autoworkers who worked at one of the striking Fisher Body plants during the GM sit-down. In *The Flint Auto Worker*, the song parody is attributed to “two Final Assembly Girls in the North Unit of Fisher Body No. 1.” It was written, primarily, to the tune of “Yankee Doodle;” however, it also includes unexpected sections sung to the tunes of “In My Solitude,” the “Star Spangled Banner,” and “Taps.” Lines of boosterism, which would fit into a women’s auxiliary song or poem, appear near the beginning of the parody:

Come on, Union, keep it up,

For we are strong and steady.
Come on, Union, Keep it up,
For we can fight a plenty.

However, the song also describes the unfolding of events at Fisher with the authority of those who experienced these events first hand, using the first-person plural “we” to describe shop organizing before the strike began.

First we begged and begged and begged and begged
All the folks we knew
To buy a Union Button,
But now they’re buying two!

Then one night G. M. collapsed
It happened in a hurry;
The boys took up their K.P. duty
With a vim and fury. (Final Assembly Girls... 4)

As women working at Fisher No. 1, the Final Assembly women who wrote this song would have been asked to leave the plant when the sit-down began. This was typical in sit-down strikes of the era. The strategy of keeping only men in the plant prevented employers from claiming that striking mothers were neglecting their children. Moreover, if women were to remain in the plant with the men, automakers could spread rumors of sexual liaisons between sit-downers and thus undermine strikes by eroding the support of strikers’ wives, which was oftentimes already tenuous. However, having to leave the plant separated the women workers from the male bonding that occurred during weeks spent occupying the plant. (Barnard 103-04, Gabin 18, Strom 364).

In the next lines, the Fisher No. 1 songsters legitimize their supportive roles as kitchen workers during the strike by referring to themselves as “darn good union sisters.” At this point, the poem veers back into boosterism territory, describing the supportive role that Fisher 1 women autoworkers played in the strike:

The boys stayed in to save our jobs
And braided up their whiskers.
The girls stayed out and cooked their grub
Like darned good Union sisters. (Final Assembly Girls... 4)

Several verses later, the poem again takes up the plight of the women as autoworkers themselves, referring to the positive difference that having shop stewards has made in their working conditions, with the verse:

The Stewards take all of our grief
And handle it right dandy.
If it wasn't for the Union now,
We'd find G. M. [r]ule unhandy. (Final Assembly Girls... 4)

Next, the song evokes labor union slang to acknowledge another contribution by women autoworkers to the strike: identifying “rats, scabs, and spies.” But then the song again makes a distinction between male and female autoworkers by urging union loyalty among the men, addressing them specifically as “boys,” as the women speakers perform the role of the nagging woman:

Now, we're bound to find some dirt,
We've found rats, scabs and spies.
But, boys, that will never work,
For you can't love both sides. (Final Assembly Girls... 4)

In this song, what it means to be “darn good union sisters,” is ambivalent, veering between the supportive role of the women's auxiliary member, and then taking on the authority of autoworkers who root out “rats, scabs and spies.” On one hand, the song addresses men, rather than making the women autoworkers themselves its subject. On the other, the song refers to how the strike improves women autoworkers' own working conditions. Ultimately, this is one of the rare instances of UAW-published creative material that acknowledges that autoworkers included women *at all*. In this song, we can see that women autoworkers who participated in the Flint strike were still working out an

emerging identity: that of the woman, autoworker, union member taking a stand against her employer on her own behalf.

Songs by women autoworkers that reflect both their second-tier standing and their status as autoworkers themselves capture the in-between position occupied by women autoworkers in the UAW more generally. In addition to their organizing in support of male autoworkers, women's auxiliary members recruited women autoworkers to their own ranks and encouraged women workers to unionize. While the UAW's efforts toward recruiting women were half-hearted, as Gabin notes in *Feminism in the Labor Movement: Women and the United Auto Workers, 1935-1975* (1990), women's auxiliaries were "critical of the male leadership's insensitivity regarding the needs and concerns of women auto workers" (42-3). Indeed, some women autoworkers joined the Women's Emergency Brigade in Flint, including three who served as lieutenants. Auxiliaries gave women autoworkers a place to participate in union activities with other women (Gabin 44). However, women's auxiliaries were not the most effective venue for women autoworkers for upholding their specific work-related interests, such as fighting wage inequality and addressing workplace grievances; ultimately the UAW undermined women autoworkers by consigning them into an ancillary organization (Gabin 44-5). In Gabin's words, "Although the close association between the auxiliaries and women auto workers was to a certain extent mutually beneficial, it tended to confirm rather than challenge the marginal status of women in the auto industry and the UAW" (45).

It is this "marginal status" that we continue to see in poems by women autoworkers themselves—even in songs in which women take the bold step of referring to themselves as *workers*. We see something similar in a parody of "Mademoiselle from

Armentières,” written by women working at Department 24 of the A.C. Spark Plug in Flint, just before the end of the 1937 sit-down. About half of the employees of A.C. Spark Plug were women (Fine 119). Inspired by sit-downers at Fisher Body, the Department 24 women were getting organized, and they used this song parody to announce their emerging union unity. At the time the song was published in *The Flint Auto Worker*, the newspaper noted that union membership in Department 24 had “jumped from less than 10% to over 80% in the past two weeks” (A.C. Spark Plug Department 24 5). Like the song by women in Fisher Body No. 1, the song by Department 24 women includes references to both women workers advocating for themselves and women intending to “help” win the strike:

The A.C. girls work all day, parley-voo
The A.C. girls work all day, parley-voo
The A.C. girls work all day, with lots of
 grief and little pay
Hinky dinky parley-voo.

The A.C. girls are getting wise, parley-voo
The A.C. girls are getting wise, parley-voo
The A.C. girls are getting wise, for they’re
 starting to organise [sic]
Hinky dinky parley-voo.

Will our bosses be surprised, parley-voo
Will our bosses be surprised, parley-voo
Will our bosses be surprised, when they
 find out we’re unionized
Hinky dinky parley-voo.

The A.C. girls are going to fight, parley-voo
The A.C. girls are going to fight, parley-voo
The A.C. girls are going to fight, to help and
 win this doggone strike
Hinky dinky parley-voo. (7)

In this song, the collective speaking voice acknowledges that the women of A.C. Spark Plug “work all day, with lots of grief and little pay” (7), but that they are about to take matters into their own hands through union organization. Despite the enthusiasm of this particular song, the women of A.C. Spark Plug were not among those Flint autoworkers who occupied their plant in the winter of 1937. Irene Mitchell, who worked at A.C. Spark Plug during the sit-down recalled that many of her coworkers had husbands working at the striking Fisher Body plants—and union organizers had to convince A.C. Spark Plug’s workers *not* to join in the sit-down. Aside from simply the urge to join their husbands in solidarity, many A.C. workers had their own work grievances related to low pay, inconsistent hours, as well as unfair instances of favoritism by foremen (Mitchell, “AC Plant 5 News” 4).²⁵ Given these grievances, the no-strike directive was one that some A.C. workers could only accept with reluctance.²⁶ “It’s hard when your husband is on strike and you are working,” recalled Mitchell.

While the women of A.C. Spark Plug did not stage their own sit-down strike, many were inspired by the sit-down to join the union. They also assisted Fisher Body strikers by working in the strike kitchen and marching on the picket line; these are duties they took up after working their own long hours.²⁷ That the “Mademoiselle from Armentières” parody discusses the “surprise” of the bosses that “AC girls” are “unionized” is significant given that women workers were widely perceived to be difficult to organize. On the one hand, these song lyrics declare that these wage-earning “girls,” are defining such expectations. On the other, the line “The A.C. girls are going to fight, to *help* and win this doggone strike,” [emphasis added] again places these women workers in a supporting role to the overall strike.

While the two poems written by women autoworkers in Flint reference supporting male strikers, the final rallying song parody by women autoworkers that I will describe records a specific gripe among female workers on the shop floor, thus stating their *own* workplace grievance in their own terms. This parody of “Ole MacDonald Had a Farm,” published in the *West Side Conveyer* in November 1937, is attributed to Ternstedt Plant 16, Department 32 workers in Detroit. The parody, titled “Dept. 22 Rat Song,” is addressed to their jobsetter, who, in a prose introduction, they accuse of lying to the bosses to protect himself. The circumstances surrounding the accusation are perhaps intentionally ambiguous, but the tone of the accusation is clear—as is the point that the “girls” in Department 32 are unified against their male boss. As they write: “THE GIRLS in Plant 16 Dept. 32 die cast, afternoon shift, would like to know when they are going to get a union man for a jobsetter. They are tired of taking orders from Denver. Next time we put you on the spot you won’t lie out of it as easy as you did the other day.” The parody that follows portrays the collective women speakers as powerful rat catchers:

Plant Sixteen Girls, they bought some traps,
 C-I-C-I-O.
 And with these traps they’ll catch some rats,
 C-I-C-I-O.
 A rat trap here, a rat trap there,
 Here trap, there trap, everywhere trap-trap,
 Plant Sixteen Girls will get all the rats,
 C-I-C-I-O. (The Girls in Plant 16 n.p.)

Like the Fisher Body final assembly workers’ parody of “Yankee Doodle,” this poem uses the union-organizing slang of calling someone who reports to bosses a “rat.” The women lay claim to this labor-union jargon in order to promote their own interests. Moreover, in this song the women position themselves as collectively taking a stand against “rats,”—and the implication is that this includes their “jobsetter.” Hence, part of

the purpose of this poem is to take collective action in order to enact a small protest against a man of authority over their daily lives.

As these three song parodies demonstrate, working women may have been seldom represented in labor-organizing publications of the Depression, as Faue has found. However, in the rare instances when women autoworkers wrote songs for themselves, they acknowledged not only their identities as women workers but also their determination to organize—and thus expressed a basic level of class-consciousness. At the same time, these song parodies seem to lack any articulation that the women who wrote them are being exploited as *women*, or that they have any grievances other than those held by male autoworkers. Greenberg has similarly argued that women involved in the CIO movement of this era most frequently addressed issues related to class—rather than those related to sexual inequality—in their poems. In his words, “While female writers rarely challenged dominant gender roles, with virtually no discussion of sexism or female nonpaid labor in the home, these poets emphasize the contribution of women in building unions” (418).

Similarly, feminist labor historians have long noted that women organizing in the 1930s were much more likely to articulate a class-consciousness than a feminist one. Sharon Hartman Strom has argued, in line with the positions of Gabin and Ruth Meyerowitz,²⁸ that the specific economic, political and cultural challenges women faced during the Depression thwarted their facility to give voice to their exploitation both at home and in the workplace. She contends that working-class women in the Depression lacked a framework and a vocabulary for addressing intersectional exploitation under both patriarchy and capitalism (360). As she writes:

To perceive as an individual woman that one's exploitation as a wife, a mother, a daughter, an employee, and a unionist were all connected was one thing; to struggle collectively on occasion against one or more of these conditions was another; to band together in the face of women's economic dependence on men and attack them all at once was impossible. There were no extent forms of protest or organization along these lines, no popular symbols to evoke, no terms with which to identify the process of liberation, no audiences who would have taken such rhetoric seriously (Strom 379-80).

While such was likely the case, it cannot be said that women did not find their own rallying points around common workplace grievances, even if they did not articulate sexism as being a contributing factor to their exploitation. The parodies of "Yankee Doodle," "Mademoiselle from Armentières," and "Ole MacDonald Had a Farm" did not evoke a feminist perspective in a contemporary sense, and yet the parodies themselves promote unity among female groups of workers advocating for themselves against powerful, male-dominated, capitalist organizations. These song parodies, as they were published in UAW newspapers, constitute collective material protest actions by women. While these women did not have "popular symbols to evoke," for their liberation, they drew on what they did have—a tradition of rallying song parodies and a discourse of union slang—to begin the process of discovering how female autoworkers could begin to articulate their own needs as both women and workers.

Contemplative poems evoking references to domesticity

In comparison to the rallying songs I have described so far, both women autoworkers and women's auxiliary members also wrote poems that were more contemplative about their roles as working-class subjects; the most notable poems of this type by both groups of women evoke traditionally female tropes of domesticity, presumably to reach out to fellow women workers and the wives of autoworkers. While both women autoworkers and women's auxiliary members wrote about economic

exploitation by employers by referring to domestic concerns, they did so in different ways. In multiple songs and poems, women's auxiliary members evoke domestic references in *concrete*, rather than abstract, language. In these songs and poems, these domestic references are sometimes incorporated into a larger conversion or education trope, in which troubles at home prompt women into union activism. In comparison, I have found two poems by women autoworkers that use domestic *metaphors* to elucidate working-class issues. Similar to the rallying variety of songs by women autoworkers, these poems do not promote an explicitly feminist consciousness. However, by using traditionally feminine metaphors in what is a typically male-dominated discourse, these women autoworkers disrupt the male-dominant discourse of the UAW to appeal specifically to women.

Women auxiliary members frequently describe how work-related trouble and financial instability for autoworker husbands cause problems caring for children, paying bills, or running a household. From such poems, we can see how the instability of factory work caused domestic uncertainty for women. For example, an anonymous wife of an autoworker, and (probable auxiliary member) who submitted a poem titled "A Tale of One City" to the *Lansing Auto Worker*, describes in verse how her husband asked for a raise, only to be told to "[w]ork longer." As she writes, low pay for her husband resulted in struggles handling family expenses, even as her husband spent more time at work:

Yet it seemed there was never an end to our trouble
For bread became higher and meat almost double.
While our landlord kept increasing our rent,
The less money we had, the more to be spent. (4)

Similarly, Tekla Roy,²⁹ wrote a poem titled "Beefsteak Blues," specifically to appeal to wives managing household expenses amid ever-increasing costs of meat. Her poem was

written in conjunction with a UAW women's auxiliary meat boycott in late 1937. The boycott's purpose was to protest the rising cost of meat, which added to household expenses; as women's auxiliary leaders pointed out, this expense somewhat offset raises from the UAW's contract with GM earlier that year (Stone and LaDuke 6). In this poem, Roy relies on a first-person narrative and borrows from the blues song form to influence the purchasing decisions of autoworkers' wives. "Beefsteak Blues" reads:

I bought a pound of meat today,
It cost me fifty cents,
I thought for once we'd have a treat
Not worrying 'bout the cents.

But when I started to prepare
The steak upon the griddle
My conscience bothered me so much
I cut it down the middle.

I put one half of it away
To save for future use.
I thought "I hope this is enough
Oh, gee, I've got the blues."

And so it goes from day to day
Scrimp here, save there,
To make our money go around,
It surely is a care.

I'm tired of it all, aren't you?
Come on. Let's organize. . .
And fight the prices that we pay
For meat from day to day.
And if we work just like we worked
To get the union in . . .
We'll celebrate Thanksgiving Day
We'll win again, we'll win! (6)

Roy uses the common experience of wanting to splurge on a special meal—but then feeling guilty about this small indulgence—to rally women readers around their shared interest in lowering the cost of meat. The speaker's domestic fantasy of cooking a "treat"

that would allow her family to enjoy a satisfying meal together, is ruined by her pangs of conscious that only give her “the blues” and prompt her to forgo this small luxury.

By appealing to women’s auxiliary members as political consumers, Roy taps into larger labor-movement tropes concerning the “good” union wife in what Faue calls the “home” that has been “politicized” through education of the union auxiliary woman (96). As Faue explains, labor movement political cartoons during the Depression emphasized the political stance that auxiliary women could take through their purchasing decisions. Nevertheless, as Faue argues, the auxiliary member’s “political role as mother and consumer [...] did not come naturally; she needed to be educated into union consciousness. [...] Once politicized through her motherhood (and her consumerism), the auxiliaries would become a crusader for the union cause” (96).

Indeed “education” is a key aspect of poems by UAW auxiliary women. For example, “Auxiliary Song,” written by Frannie J. Wakeford, is a parody of “Darling Nellie Gray” that emphasizes the role of women as students of labor organizing, at the ready to lend a helping hand to their unionized husbands:

When the wives of union members learned of solidarity
Many charters were obtained without delay,
For the right to work together, aiding all humanity,
Hand in hand with the union all the way.

(Chorus)

We are proud as we can be of our fine auxiliaries,
Though we’re striving to improve them as we go;
We have pledged cooperation, and we mean to see it through
In our efforts to help the CIO

We are seeking education in the problems we must meet
In our struggle for the better things in life,
With the union’s trust and faith in us, we won’t allow defeat,
For we’re organized auto workers’ wives. (2)

Initially, “Auxiliary Song” may appear to be a song of dogmatic, female boosterism for the male-dominated union. And in some ways, this is accurate. But the song also contains several references to women newly open to the unionizing experience and undergoing a conversion. In the opening lines, the women have only just “learned of solidarity” and their “charters” had only recently been “obtained without delay.” The song’s chorus contains the judicious admission that, although the women are “proud” of their “fine auxiliaries,” they are still “striving to improve them” through a continuing learning process. In the second verse, the focus is on how the women are “seeking education in the problems [they] must meet” and the line “With the union’s trust in faith in us, we won’t allow defeat,” betrays an apprehension that the union might *not* have trust and faith in the auxiliaries.

In addition to references to education, women auxiliary members also frequently referenced a full-blown conversion trope, which appears in at least one poem. The typical auxiliary conversion trope features a woman who is initially suspicious of union organizing. In this narrative, an angry wife storms into union headquarters to track down a husband who has failed to come home. But then, rather than dragging home her wayward husband, the woman sees all the women’s auxiliary work that is to be done, is talked into lending a hand, and soon comes to understand the financial benefits of banding together with other wives. The most widely referenced example of a conversion narrative appeared in a *United Automobile Worker* issue of February 1937. Violet Baggett, then president of Detroit’s West Side Local Auxiliary, wrote that before she joined the auxiliary, she thought that the union meetings her husband attended were run by “Reds,” and “that they met in beer gardens with plenty of short-haired girls to

entertain them” (11). But when Baggett went to investigate, instead of finding the “flappers and empty beer bottles” she expected at the union hall, she found a kitchen full of women working, “peeling vegetables” and “washing dishes” (11). As she writes, “I met a lady coming from the kitchen and before I could make up my mind just what to say first she smiled and asked me if I’d come to help” (11). Rather than getting mad, Baggett pitched in with the kitchen work—and then she kept coming back. By working alongside the other women, she came to understand them and their purpose—and to find something to believe in beyond herself. “Just being a woman isn’t enough anymore. I want to be a human being,” she reflects, in what might be interpreted as a moment of feminist awakening (11).³⁰

A similar conversion narrative featuring a “good” wife of an autoworker is evident in a poem that appeared in *Women in Auto*, a hand-typed, mimeographed bulletin with line drawings distributed among UAW auxiliary members. The poem, titled “Song of the Women in Auto,” attributed to “E.S.,” is a first-person narrative, told from the perspective of one autoworker’s wife; however, the title implies that the story told is more universal than individual. The speaker is upset that her husband makes so little money. Their mutual frustration with his backbreaking work and their shared inability to afford basic needs for their children causes the couple to fight. The first several stanzas read:

My man he works in auto
And comes home tired each night.
We never get to goin’ out
But we get cross and fight.

We never have enough to buy
The things the kiddies need,
And my man’s always telling me

About that awful speed.

I often think of how we planned
To live so good and fine
And spend our lives in harmony--
Till he got on that line. (E.S. n.p.)

In the poem's next section, the speaker undergoes a conversion experience of becoming upset with her husband for failing to come home, only to discover that he had been participating in a sit-down strike. By the end of the poem, she finds that other women related to autoworkers have shared her experiences and that they have power in numbers as part of a women's auxiliary. While the poem foregoes the kitchen work aspect of the Baggett's conversion narrative, the spine of the trope remains:

He started goin' to meetin's
And come home late at night
Just where he got the strength for it
I couldn't figure out.

One fine day he didn't come home
And I was worried stiff.
I know that when he finally came
We'd have an awful tiff.

But things were not what I had thought
He stayed right in the plant.
With other men he sat right down
And what they did was grand.

I found that there were other wives
And sisters, cousins, aunts,
Whose men had suffered some as mine
In those terrible speed-up plants.

So we all joined together
In the Women's Auxiliary
And fed the man and fought with them
To win the Victory!

In the final lines, the speaker describes her own transformation, after discovering that “there were other wives / And sisters, cousins, aunts / Whose men had suffered same as mine.” Hence, the speaker’s conversion from an isolated, worried wife into a self-actualized women’s auxiliary member also changes her means of dealing with her frustrations wrought by her husband’s work in the plant. Rather than fighting a solitary battle with her exhausted husband over household expenses, she has learned that she and the other wives can use their collective energy to fight company management for better working conditions for the men.³¹

“Song of the Women in Auto” reminds us that many women in the Depression were indeed, new to participating in public life, and activism in particular. The auxiliary gave women a sense of sisterhood—and a place to work for a cause beyond their immediate domestic sphere; this was, indeed, a place where many women found that their roles as wives could also incorporate the identity of an activist. The conversion trope provided women with a collective folklore about their own emergence from domesticity into union-organizing and even political lives.

Interestingly, the few poems by women autoworkers that evoke domestic themes do not rely on such overt education or conversion tropes—but these poems are subtly didactic concerning class-consciousness nonetheless. That women autoworkers evoked domestic metaphors to discuss work-place-related subjects reflects their identities as both women and workers. As Alice Kessler-Harris argues in *Gendering Labor History* (2007), women’s identities remained connected to the domestic sphere long after sizable numbers of women entered the industrial work force in the nineteenth century. Wage-earning women had to negotiate a cultural “tension” between the pressure to perform the “virtue”

of domestic work and a countervailing social pressure to assert “independence” from the domestic sphere (*Gendering* 118).

To understand just how deeply seeded this pressure was, we can turn to Federici’s history of how women’s identities became forged with domestic duties with the dawn of the Modern period. As I have summarized, Federici explains that under the emerging capitalist paradigm, as women were banned from craft trades and other means of earning wages, they became wholly financially dependent on men. Moreover, because women’s domestic labor earned no direct wages, their work raising children and taking care of the household “became invisible” under capitalism, although their labor in “the reproduction of the worker” was vital for the continuance of the capitalist system (75). As Federici concludes, this was a state of affairs that culminated only in the “19th century with the creation of the full-time housewife,” as capitalists raised wages for men enough to support their families (75).

Throughout this transition, (Federici cites the 16th and 17th century specifically) women faced increased subjugation, in an effort to subdue them into their dependent state. Federici cites several examples supporting her assertion that this subjugation was pervasive—stemming both from civic authorities and the wider culture. In many European countries, women were barred from independent financial dealings; moreover, cultural norms deterred them from appearing in public (100). Women who dared to be defiant were subjected to prohibitions or accusations of witchcraft. Public torture of these woman was not uncommon (100-2). As Federici writes, “In the Europe of the Age of reason, the women accused of being scolds were muzzled like dogs and paraded in the streets; prostitutes were whipped, or caged and subjected to fake drownings, while capital

punishment was established for women convicted of adultery” (101). The “taming” of women became a familiar cultural trope, which “was called for and celebrated in countless misogynous plays and tracts,” including—perhaps most famously—Shakespeare’s 1593 play *The Taming of the Shrew* (100). Eventually, the relentless subjugation of women shifted cultural expectations for female behavior. As the status of women diminished, the stereotype of the untamable shrew was eventually replaced by the stereotype of feminine submission:

While at the time of the witch-hunt women had been portrayed as savage beings, mentally weak, unsatiably lusty, rebellious, insubordinate, incapable of self-control, by the 18th century the canon has been reversed. Women were now depicted as passive, asexual beings, more obedient, more moral than men, capable of exerting a positive moral influence on them. (103)

Even as women increasingly became wage earners at the end of the nineteenth century, they remained subject to residual “family-bound conceptions of virtue” (*Gendering* 119) that remained intact into the next century—although conceived of in evolving ways. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, “whether married or single,” claims Kessler-Harris, “women’s self-images begin in their relationships to home and motherhood” (*Gendering* 118). Likely because women retained this traditional notion of themselves, even as they worked for wages, some UAW women used traditionally female domestic references to make working-class assertions.³²

For instance, Mary Schwartz, of Local 235, the Chevrolet Hamtramck local, wrote “A Song for Strikers,” a poem that uses culinary references to describe how bosses take advantage of any workers who are willing to submit to their authority. The speaker addresses the worker-reader in the second person, delivering the message that if “you,” as a worker, are willing to take on more work without a fight, than “the boss” will gladly

oblige. The poem, as a whole, is a didactic warning to workers not to trust appearances or fall victim to dictated labor practices without pushback:

Chicken dinner without chicken
If you eat, the boss will stick in.
And cherry pie without a cherry,
The boss will pile, if you will carry.
The boss will hand you a small pay,
If you let him get away.
Outside, bosses plant pretty flowers,
Inside, they demand lengthy hours
In the constitution are human rights—
Outside you can't get them without unity and fights
You and you unite together
The bosses want you separated rather
Cherry pie without a cherry
The boss will pile, if you will carry. (7)

Perhaps the most unexpected comparison in the poem is the connection that Schwartz draws between appearances and reality. Just as a cherry pie that is missing cherries may look fine on the outside, the auto plant's appearance, with its "pretty flowers" is a deception, for "inside" the factories the bosses who had flowers planted "demand lengthy hours" from workers. The references to culinary dishes do double duty, here. On one hand, they are the featured element in a metaphor for being cheated. On the other, they constitute the specific image of a worker trying to carry too many trays—piled on by the boss—evoked in the lines "The boss will pile if you will carry." Such an accessible image helps a reader to conceptualize the inherent unfairness in the phenomenological experiences of working long hours or being subject to a speedup. In this way, this poem subtly hails women readers who likely continue to identify with domestic expectations in particular.

A parody of a poem by Jessica Nelson North, attributed to an anonymous worker at A.C. Spark Plug, does something similar—but with a more mocking attitude toward

the domestic metaphor it puts forth. This poem uses a tea party metaphor to describe the selfish purview of scabs. “A Scab at Tea,” appeared in *The Flint Auto Worker* in April of 1937, two months after the conclusion of the sit-down strike; it is attributed to “an AC Girl,” who worked for A.C. Spark Plug. The poem uses tropes of both genteel poetry and feminine domesticity to reveal the selfishness of a scab. It reads:

I had a little tea party
This afternoon at three.
‘Twas very small,
No scabs at all—
Just I, Myself and Me!

“Myself” ate up the cookies,
While “I” drank up the tea;
‘Twas also ‘I’
Who ate some pie
And passed the cake to “Me”! (An A.C. Girl 3)³³

The poem compares the scab’s willingness to work during a strike to the absurdity of holding a tea party—meant to be a social ritual—for oneself. The humor of the poem lies in the self-satisfaction that the scab speaker has in this individual act of eating up all the cookies and pie, and drinking all the tea without sharing. While most poems degrading scabs position them in hell or describe their lowly origins (see Chapter 3), “A Scab at Tea” positions the scab in a genteel, highly feminized, environment. This scab is not cast as a marginally unemployed worker stealing the jobs of strikers out of desperation, but rather as a faintly aristocratic sipper of afternoon tea. Thus, the scab—rather than being positioned as the scum of the earth—is cleverly positioned as a privileged monopolizer of limited resources. Hence, this poem subverts any tendency the reader might have to pity the poor scab; rather, this scab’s class-traitor actions place her squarely on the side of possessing individual privilege. Like “A Song for Strikers,” “A Scab at Tea” uses a

metaphor based on a domestic theme to hail and educate readers—and female readers in particular. Indeed, amid the masculine rhetoric of *The Flint Auto Worker*, this small poem with feminine references appears all the more distinct and subversive. Once again, the poem has a message of class-consciousness couched in a domestic metaphor. By using a domestic metaphor amid an overwhelmingly masculine discourse, this poem seems intended to hail female readers, in particular, into a class-consciousness awakening.

In conclusion, this chapter has shown that both women autoworkers and auxiliary members contributed poems and songs to the UAW's early formation during the Depression. Some of these poems and songs were written to appeal to male workers; however, many appealed specifically to women. While many rallying poems of women's auxiliary members were written in a spirit of self-sacrifice and in conscious support of male workers, women auxiliary members also encouraged women to “fight” on the picket lines—an act that went beyond fulfilling expected roles related to providing food and inspiration for strikers. Song parodies by women autoworkers similarly touched upon both fighting and helping themes, but also evoked references to insider knowledge of being an autoworker, as well as references to labor-organizing slang. As such, songs by autoworker women were sometimes a hybrid form—borrowing from the boosterism of women's auxiliary songs and poems and the masculine labor-organizing discourse of male autoworkers. This hybridity reflected ambivalent attitudes regarding women autoworkers within the union more broadly. Finally, despite a lack of an articulated feminist consciousness in these poems, we should regard them as spaces in which women autoworkers negotiated their emerging identities as women, workers, and activists. In many cases, these songs and poems demonstrate that women were willing to subvert

traditional expectations of femininity and even to “fight” alongside men, in a very literal sense. Similarly, poems by both women autoworkers and women’s auxiliary members that evoke domestic themes did not appeal directly to a feminist consciousness. However, by evoking themes that were meant to appeal to women, in particular, these poems disrupted the male-dominated discourse of labor organizing more generally. In the next chapter, I will show how a popular poem of the early twentieth-century labor movement further reveals the contested role of women during the early years of the UAW.

CHAPTER 3

THE TUMULTOUS PARODIC JOURNEY OF “ST. PETER AT THE GATE”

“At the Golden Gate” was perhaps the most frequently reprinted (and parodied) labor poem of the early twentieth century. During the Depression, union-sponsored newspapers, such as the *United Automobile Worker* and *The Flint Auto Worker* republished this rhyming narrative poem of mysterious origin. In this poem, which almost always appeared without attribution, a scab arrives at the gates of St. Peter, confident that his lifetime of obsequious company loyalty will win him easy admittance into heaven. Instead, St. Peter damns him to hell—before reconsidering that “the imps below” would be disgusted by the burning scab’s stink and ultimately reject him. The poem ends with St. Peter’s final order to the scab: “Go back to your master on earth and tell / That they don’t even want a scab in HELL” (“Without a Card” 2). As this chapter describes, unions in the early twentieth century used this poem to explain and proselytize a class-based ethical code that deems a scab to be a class traitor. The poem’s framework is built atop an older scaffold of traditional Christian moral configurations and related familiar folktales about the hereafter. But associations that workers would have had with this poem extend further yet.

“At the Golden Gate” is a parody that workers would have related with its predecessor, “St. Peter at the Gate”—a poem with a similar narrative structure that had been widely published in the popular press. Although “St. Peter at the Gate” was written more than forty years before the Depression (and has mostly disappeared from contemporary popular culture of the early twenty-first century) in the 1930s, it was still standard material for poetry anthologies and poetic recitations at events such as church

fundraisers and community-based club meetings. As such, an additional, unexpected aspect of the union poem's history relates to a largely extinct aspect of American quotidian civic life.³⁴ We can, through tracing the original poem and its parody across both time and public use, demonstrate a connection between realms of American community-based social life and the labor movement of the early twentieth century. We can also infer from the relationship between the parody and the original that autoworkers, and other working-class Americans, were well versed in at least some types of popular poetry, even if the titles they knew are not widely studied today. As such, in recalling the history of "St. Peter at the Gate" we do more than recover the story of a single poem's collective development and use; we also gain a small glimpse into the way that popular poems were read, constructed, circulated, consumed, and reworked by working-class Americans in the early twentieth century.

As I will further discuss, "At the Golden Gate" may have been a parody, but it was also popular enough in its own right that it inspired several autoworkers to write additional parodies of the initial parody. Moreover, the trope of *the scab in hell* that "At the Golden Gate" set into circulation became a labor-organizing touchstone of the 1930s. Autoworker-poets repurposed it for their own poems denouncing the ethical weaknesses of scabs and those of similarly questionable moral character. Chronicling the use of works such as "At the Golden Gate" gives us an indication of how workers drew from specific labor-oriented tropes to form their own cultural shorthand, adaptable for a variety of protest situations. This analysis also shows how labor organizers developed more than a working set of ethical frameworks; they also developed unique cultural hallmarks

grounded in popular culture—yet apart from it—especially for recruiting and retaining workers for their cause.

The parodic strain of “At the Golden Gate” is undergirded by the Christian trope of St. Peter guarding the gates of heaven. As I will elaborate, the original version involves a shrewish wife who appears before St. Peter and is sent to hell. In the labor version, a scab replaces the wife and becomes the damned person. As I will argue, read from a feminist perspective, the labor-orientated parody asserts an egalitarian ethical code, yet it incompletely sublates the hierarchical patriarchal structures inherent in the original narrative poem. Therefore, the parody both questions the hierarchical constructions of capitalism that exploit workers, while reinforcing hierarchical structures that vilify opinionated women as shrew-like. Studying the evolution of parodies in this way can prove fruitful for discovering the emergence and foreclosures of ethical codes in parodies, and more specifically, the array of associations that became attached to such moral codes, specifically because they are communicated through parodic forms. In Chapter 4, I will discuss how a method of mapping archival instances of parodies and showing how poems evolve over space and time can track evolutions in ethical codes and thinking.

This chapter more broadly demonstrates how parodic reliance on an older work can operate as a double-edged sword, especially when the content of the poem is political. On one hand, a political parodist is able to rely on the familiar structure of the original poem to hail the reader. On the other hand, the underlying theme of the original poem is not always in agreement with the political message of the parody. Thus, in the parlance of Raymond Williams, while older poetic structures can give readers a foothold

for grasping the *emergent* ethics or ways of thinking the parodist aims to promote, they can also transmit vestiges of *residual* hierarchies that cannot be stripped away if the work is to remain a recognizable parody.³⁵ The residual structure and underlying message of the first poem can indeed contradict the emergent ideas framed in the new poem, resulting in a conceptual tension within the parody.

My research shows, in particular, how autoworkers used parodic approaches in surprising ways. While we usually think about parodies as one-off creative works, my research shows that Depression-era working-class writers wrote and rewrote same poems time and time again.³⁶ Demonstrating that parodies were used in this way can help future scholars to recognize that poems they encounter in popular and labor-organizing journals of the early twentieth century may well be a parodic work or borrowing from a parodic strain. Without study that explores such traditions, scholars encountering poems that appear isolated may miss the fact that these are indeed parodies (or parodies of parodies) and are thus potentially encoded with parodic histories.

Scholars investigating the culture of the American left in the 1930s have often been tempted to seek out the most original poems by activist workers, rather than focus on exhaustive rewriting of the same poems and songs again and again. Literary study of modernist American poetry on one hand, and even the study of 1930s “proletarian” poetry on the other, has prompted scholars to focus on what was original and evolving in American poetry. Scholars have sought out both literary “breaks,” and “periods,”—two distinctions between which Fredric Jameson has located a dialectical relationship. Jameson and others have noted that this approach has obscured other types of work—particularly those that might be read as clichéd or lacking in innovation.

According to Jameson in *A Singular Modernity*, the search for literary breaks in the “narration” of modernism has led to a proliferation of scholarly assertions concerning which literary moments constitute these breaks; the difficulty with these assertions is that while many literary works are arguably innovative, such works always necessarily also rest on prior literary traditions. As such, the two categories of “break” and “period” subsume one other, as each break also marks a continuation of a period (23-4, 31-3). In elaborating modernism’s concern with innovation, Jameson observes how the pursuit of identifying novelty in art has paradoxically stopped the advancement of art in a type of “filmic freeze-frame,” as innovation becomes the unchanging constant aesthetic value of both modernism and post-modernism. As Jameson writes, “Each text ... ‘makes new’ in its turn; the palpable contradiction between the absolute claim for novelty and the inevitable repetition, the eternal return, of the same gesture of innovation over and over again, does not disqualify the characterization but rather lends it a mesmerizing, forever perplexing and fascinating, spell” (125). As an antidote to this way of thinking, Jameson briefly suggests Theodor Adorno’s vision of modernism as a succession of retreats from what is “taboo” and thus “originating in an ever-keener distaste for what is conventional and outmoded, rather than an exploratory appetite for the unexplored and undiscovered” (127). However, from this perspective, the idea of what works constitute modernism grows ever smaller, as approaches that were once innovative are quickly found to be clichéd and “taboo” and are thus discarded. While this perspective seems to carry the “advantage of impeding the slippage of its terms and tokens toward the extra-aesthetic” inherent in the focus on the new, the approach also has an interesting downside—and one that I find relevant to my study of parodies. As Jameson observes, what becomes “taboo”

in modernism is not *what* is described or represented, rather it is the *methods* of representation. Still, the clichéd methods of representation oftentimes contaminate the represented material itself, even as what is being represented remains present in the world. Thus, “modern” methods are able to represent an ever-shrinking realm of reality. As Jameson explains, it is “not the oldness of the older emotions as such, but the conventions of their expression: not the disappearance of this or that kind of human relationship, but rather the intolerable commonplaces with which it had become so intimately associated as to have been indistinguishable” (127). Under this framework, however:

The outmoded and conventionalized literary expression, now identified as sentimentality, can also be seen to designate the obsolescence of a certain emotion in and of itself; and the analysis by way of taboo to offer a mediatory instrument for a more specifically social symptomatology. But most often those outmoded emotions live on in social life itself long after modernism has pronounced its judgment on them; whence the intensifying suspicion of an elitism built into the very framework of this art, and also the sense that, whatever new areas of feeling and expression modernism has opened up, its representational focus spans an ever-dwindling sphere of social and class relationships (127-28).

Jameson never mentions the poetry written by unionizing workers as an example of sentimentalized writing representing working-class solidarity, but it is perhaps an example of a type of art with a “representational focus” that falls into the zone of what is “taboo” from a modernist perspective. And parodies themselves would certainly be included in this category.

There is, of course, something to be learned from examining the innovative aspects of art, especially when “make it new” was the proclaimed credo of so many twentieth-century artists, far beyond Pound; we see how evolving politics and consumer cultures influenced aesthetic innovations (and vice-versa) which played out across time,

influencing yet further innovation and ways of thinking. Literary scholars, in particular, have sought to theorize the ongoing struggle of twentieth-century poets to transform language corrupted by hegemonic capitalist hierarchies and commercial culture. However, while such study has been tremendously worthwhile for enriching our understanding of American poetry, I argue that a focus on innovation in poetry generally obscures the creative, political poetry written by those who have been most exploited by the capitalist system. My inquiry seeks to discover a small piece of what lies outside Jameson's "ever-dwindling sphere of social and class relationships" represented by modernist approaches. As part of this inquiry, I wonder what poems do when the quest of the poet is not innovation but rhetorical persuasion of working-class peers who share a similar daily routine and lifestyle.

While I want to be careful not to essentialize matters of taste, in general the familiarity and humor of parodies make them more inviting for non-specialist readers than are modernist lyrical poems written specifically for specialist readers, or even more romantic "proletarian poetry" written by well-meaning poets championing the cause of the working-class. As Pierre Bourdieu has noted, the artist "who aims to be autonomous" (read: the modernist artist) in particular, emphasizes form over content; understanding such work is dependent on the specific training of the person encountering it. Given this set of circumstances, working-class people are less likely to have been trained to read the coded references of modernist, and even post-modern art. As Bourdieu contends, "Even in the classroom, the dominant definition of the legitimate way of appropriating culture and works of art favours those who have had early access to legitimate culture, in a cultured household, outside of scholastic disciplines, since even within the educational

system it devalues scholarly knowledge and interpretation as ‘scholastic’ or even ‘pedantic’ in favour of direct experience and simple delight” (2). It is perhaps telling that modernist poems rarely appeared in union-organizing newspapers or worker-composed strike bulletins, whereas parodies appeared widely and often.

However, I argue that so-called “outsider” art can also have a set of codes that one must be trained to read. By focusing on innovation, scholars, too, can misread parodies as “original” works and thus overlook their encoded parodic references; these are “codes” which would have been readily apparent to twentieth-century readers of popular and labor poetry, regardless of how attuned these same readers were to modernist work. Furthermore, the study of labor parodies in particular is important for what it reveals about the emergent ethical code of labor activism, and how poetry, in particular, affected how such ethics became imbedded in familiar tropes. By borrowing from material that fellow workers already found familiar and inviting, autoworker parodists were able to promote union ideologies and emergent union-building ethics in a way that encouraged both readership and enthusiastic written responses. Parodists relied on hierarchical structures already at play in original poems, or in older parodies; in this way, versions of poems became vessels (or poetic forms) within themselves for the shorthand communication of union-organizing ethical codes amid ever-evolving circumstances.

While we can consider the usefulness of rhetorical strategy reliant on parodies, we can also consider its limitations; the use of familiar lyrics for broadcasting emergent ethical codes is, indeed, a double-edged sword. Michael McKeon has shown that certain “reigning narrative ‘epistemologie(s)’ in the rise of the British novel both allowed for and limited certain transmissions of class-based ideologies and worldviews, depending on

which form of the novel was most popular during a given era (“Generic”).³⁷ Similarly poetic parodies that borrow older poetic structures (i.e., older versions of the poems themselves) both promote and limit what political ideologies can be expressed to a reader. The parodic strain I discuss in this chapter provides an apt example, for the patriarchal structure it transmits is implicit in the Christian trope undergirding this parody, even while the parody, on its surface, promotes an egalitarian message. While such older structures can give readers a foothold for grasping the ideology the parodist aims to promote, they can also transmit vestiges of residual hierarchies that cannot be stripped away if the work is to remain a recognizable parody. Studying the evolution of parodies—tracing the way they travel across time and space—can prove fruitful for discovering how such ethical codes emerged, and more specifically, the array of associations that became attached to such moral codes, specifically because they were communicated through poetic forms and parodies.

“At the Golden Gate”

“At the Golden Gate” began appearing in labor journals during the early years of the twentieth century, and it was widely published in the years that followed. In this humorous poem, a scab who has died appears before St. Peter and asks for admittance into heaven. With confidence, he hands St. Peter a company letter of recommendation and cites his disavowal of unionists as one reason he should easily pass muster. The scab’s language is unmistakably the discourse of someone well versed in company-speak. The singsong arrangement of the poem’s rhyming couplets underscores the scab’s vapid performance of an employee saying exactly what a boss would want to hear. He says, for instance:

You'll find I was always content to live
On whatever the company cared to give. [...]

I never grumbled; I've never struck;
I've never mixed with union truck.
But I must be going this way to win,
So open, St. Peter, and pass me in" (Carroll 426).

To the scab's shock, St. Peter not only denies him heavenly entrance, but also prepares to damn him to an eternity of fire and brimstone. Summoning his "imps," St. Peter declares: "Escort this fellow around to Hell [...]" (Carroll 426). St. Peter then has second thoughts. Imagining what will happen to the scab in hell, he concludes that the smell of the "cooking scab" will be more than the inhabitants of the underworld can take, and thus "would cause a revolt, a strike...." (Carroll 426). In the final two lines, St. Peter second-guesses his original pronouncement, leaving the scab stuck in an earthly limbo.

The only literary scholar to write specifically about "At the Golden Gate" is Cary Nelson, who includes a short section describing the poem in *Revolutionary Memory: Recovering the Poetry of the American Left* (2001). It is fitting that Nelson examines this particular poem, given his unique approach to studying American poetry; he draws on his extensive private collection of union memorabilia and ephemera to inform and inspire his research. He actually discovered "St. Peter and the Scab"—as the version he found was titled—on the back of a printed "purple card" from 1923. On the front side, is printed an announcement for a meeting to establish the amalgamation of Chicago railroad unions (28-31). Nelson cites "St. Peter and the Scab" as an example of the sort of poem that has been overlooked by scholars, describing it as "an irreverent, upbeat, cheeky poem about striker breakers, 'scabs,' and (...) their status in this life and the hereafter" (29). He notes a certain lack of self-consciousness inherent in the poem's narrative verse, despite its

heavy-handed plot line: “Some would call it doggerel, and if that is the case, the text displays no internal evidence of anticipatory embarrassment at that designation” (29). He is also struck by the poem’s usefulness as a tool for gathering workers together around a common cause, and he advocates for the study of material culture—items such as the “purple card” and other ephemera—so that scholars can more fully understand the context in which poems were read and circulated (36). As he writes, “If we want to know what poetry meant in 1923 [...] we should not let the poem card of ‘St. Peter and the Scab’ be swept aside in the wake of the issue of *The Dial* containing T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, published but one year earlier” (36).

The origin of “St. Peter at the Gate”

As it turns out, there is still more to the story of “St. Peter and the Scab” *itself* than even Nelson had imagined. The poem it parodies, “St. Peter at the Gate,” was written in the early 1890s by an eccentric newspaper editor from Galesburg, Michigan named Joseph Bert Smiley. The 120-line original, written in rhyming couplets, tells the story of a married couple who appear together before St. Peter. The wife assumes she will easily get into heaven. She brags to St. Peter about all the time she spent preaching to her neighbors about sin and the path of righteousness. But she is worried about her husband, who has been rather less pious. As she puts it, “He smokes and he swears, and grave faults he’s got, / And I don’t know whether he’ll pass or not” (Smiley n.p.). When she was off praying and preaching, he was left to fend for himself in the kitchen pantry. Like the scab poem that came later, “St. Peter at the Gate” takes a turn mid-way through, when the wife starts nitpicking at St. Peter himself, including the untidy “way [his] whiskers are trimmed” (n.p.). St. Peter, not amused, utters: “Who’s tending this gateway,--you or

I?” and punishes the woman by sending her to hell. With the wife headed toward fire and brimstone, St. Peter turns to the terrified husband. However, St. Peter’s tone changes altogether, and he treats the husband—so long married to this shrew—with the utmost compassion, declaring: “Swearing is wicked. Smoke’s not good. / He smoked and swore,—I should think he would!” The husband is presented with a harp and a seat “with a cushion,—up near the throne!” (n.p.). In an illustrated version Smiley self-published in 1893, the husband is pictured leaning back in a chair, flanked by two comely feminine angels. He glances at one of them with a come-hither look. A caption reads, “Well, this beats *cucumbers*, anyway” (n.p.).

The poem first appeared in American newspapers in about 1892, and it spread like wildfire as local editors received copies and reprinted it (“Wednesday, March 30, 1892” 3; “Committed Suicide” 1, “Suicide of Bert Smiley” 1).³⁸ To a contemporary reader, the poem is outrageously sexist; the wife is instantly recognizable as a shrew criticizing her husband’s picayune transgressions as she assumes her own moral rectitude.³⁹ Nevertheless, in the years following its initial widespread publication in American newspapers, “St. Peter at the Gate” was also anthologized in books of material deemed to be well suited for public readings and recitations. One such anthology was *The Progressive Speaker: Containing the Best Readings and Recitations for all Occasions*, a volume published in 1897. A glance through this book shows just how elaborate public recitations of poems during the turn of the century were. Aside from containing recitations, the book also includes special instructions for child performers, elocution advice, posture and gesture examples, and “tableaus,” which were inspirational photographs of costumed performers with faraway stares, who were flanked by suggested

stage props. The book also proclaims the contemporary era a heyday of sorts for public readings and recitations, stating that “there never was a time when distinguished lecturers, orators and public speakers were in such great demand or received such liberal compensation as they do now” (v). Even if the number of such performances dwindled as the twentieth century progressed, “St. Peter at the Gate,” remained an American favorite, anthologized as late as 1936 in *The Best Loved Poems of the American People*, edited by Hazel Felleman. Newspaper accounts of the poem’s public recitation continue through the 1980s, but die out thereafter.⁴⁰

The earliest labor parody of “St. Peter at the Gate” that features a scab appeared when the poem’s original version was merely a decade old. An early parody (and possibly the original) was published in 1902, in a union journal for boilermakers and iron ship builders. This version, titled “At the Golden Gate,” is attributed to J. C. Carroll of Evanston, Wyoming, and is the version I excerpt above (425-26). The Carroll version has nine stanzas, rather than the shortened three-stanza version Nelson found on the back of his 1923 card.⁴¹ Reprints appeared regularly in union newspapers throughout the early twentieth century.

St. Peter jokes and their underlying subtext

Both the “At the Golden Gate” and “St. Peter at the Gate” rely on a trope that would have been as readily familiar to an American audience of the 1930s as it is to Americans today: that of the St. Peter joke. Jokes have long featured St. Peter guarding the gates of heaven. However, the trope is only tangentially related to a specific Biblical passage (Lang 182-3). Scholars link the association between St. Peter and the heavenly gates to Mathew 16, in which Peter tells Jesus he believes that Jesus is the true “Son of

the living God” (*King James* Matt. 16.16). Jesus responds by giving Peter “the keys of the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 16.19). From this scant passage, storytellers and joke-tellers have extrapolated the idea of St. Peter guarding the heavenly gate, carrying out God’s will (Lang 182-3).

Jokes featuring St. Peter as the “porter” of heaven date back centuries in Anglo culture. For instance, as early as 1526, the English told a St. Peter joke that mocked the boastfulness of the Welch, as well as their love of “roasted cheese” or rarebit. In the joke, God tells St. Peter that the Welch in heaven have become too boastful and he would like them banished. St. Peter agrees to do God’s bidding, and he thus calls out, “Cause bob!” which, according to an early printed version of the joke, “is as much to say as ‘roasted cheese.’” In response, the Welch, “ran out of heaven a great pace.” St. Peter thus, “suddenly went into heaven and locked the door and so sparred (barred) all the welchmen out” (qtd. in Davies 3).⁴²

The more contemporary version of a St. Peter joke nearly always involves someone or a group of people appearing before St. Peter’s gate. St. Peter, in turn, acts as a heavenly administrator, deciding who will gain entrance to heaven. As folklorist Phyllis Potter, who collected dozens of American St. Peter jokes in the late 1970s explains: “Simplistically, the situation is thus: all humanity—regardless of race, creed, occupation or sex—will have some contact with God upon death, and in the common convention God and St. Peter are inextricably linked. Thus St. Peter, despite the actual prominence and centrality of his role in the joke, will at least make an appearance” (38).

This storyline, of course, lies atop the more somber ancient religious construction of heaven and hell. Given St. Peter’s association with God, the saint’s endorsement of a

particular moral code serves as validation that the sanctioned code is both correct and universal (at least within the narrative). The problem for those approaching the heavenly gates is that the question of *which* moral code St. Peter will endorse is a matter of some confusion for earthly beings. Both “St. Peter at the Gate” and “At the Golden Gate” hinge on similar narrative structures involving subjects who fail to recognize which set of moral codes St. Peter will favor. Moreover, part of the appeal of both “St. Peter at the Gate” and its labor parody is that both versions are heavy-handed fables that reinforce ethical codes that are—it is assumed by the ethos of the poem—shared by the reader or audience. St. Peter’s endorsement of these moral codes serves to certify that the audiences’ beliefs are in line with those of God. Hence, reading such a poem would give a reader who agrees with the sanctioned moral code an affirmation that he or she can correctly distinguish universal right from wrong.

In the original “St. Peter at the Gate,” the wife places faith in the idea that her worshipful performances will win her divine acceptance. Meanwhile, she fails to recognize that these are the same actions that render her neglectful of her husband’s needs and lead her to judge him too harshly. As a result of her misreading of an ethical situation, she is the one who is sent to hell. The poem provides a model example of someone following the letter of the law, while ignoring its spirit. The wife’s damnation for ignoring the needs of her less-than-pious husband promotes a less judgmental code for tolerating human weakness (if that human is a man) than by-the-book piety.

The labor version borrows this idea of ethical misjudgment; in this case the poem hinges on the scab’s inverted sense of morality, which he appears to have swallowed wholesale from the lords of capital. The scab’s mistake is that he thinks the will of the

company is synonymous with the will of God, as evidenced by his confident presentation of his employee credentials. After the scab has proclaimed his loyalty to his employers and claimed he has “never mixed with union truck,” even St. Peter “had to laugh,” reacting in the way many union-activist readers of this poem would—in recognition that the scab’s sycophantic proclamations and sacrifices for his employer will not be rewarded in the afterlife. The scab does not realize that St. Peter adheres to a moral code of class-consciousness that regards scabs as class-traitors; this pro-union moral code, in this poem, stands as the true universal, usurping the capitalist ethical code and thus rendering useless the scab’s pro-company obsequiousness. As such, the poem becomes a useful tool—a pro-union folktale—for proselytizing class-consciousness among workers. The assumption that the reader will relate to St. Peter’s disgust with the scab serves to reinforce union support among the devoted. Beyond this, however, the poem is perhaps also useful for hailing the unconvinced. By the time the narrative of the scab has captured a doubtful reader, this reader has already invested in the poem through the act of reading the poem’s rhyme scheme and perhaps laughing at the scab’s pathetic performance. By the end of the poem, questioning the poem’s moral sensibility becomes an act of refusing the poem’s appealing humor, storyline, and moral universe—as well as taking sides with the groveling scab. This is an act perhaps more difficult than simply doubting a dryly rendered pro-union, anti-scab screed.

UAW parodies of “At the Golden Gate”

However “At the Golden Gate” affected its readers, autoworker-poets found material in this parody that warranted even further creative adaptation. UAW publications of the late 1930s include several poems (and some song lyrics) by workers that are

derivative of “At the Golden Gate”; these poems sometimes extend beyond the typical framework of a “parody” and feature some creative mix of heaven, hell, St. Peter, and a scab or other similarly “despicable” character. All of these parodies and poems serve to underscore the depraved nature of either the scab or whoever is substituted for the scab within the poem’s familiar structure. More than one version calls attention to the moral degeneracy of the scab character by alleging or alluding to his animalistic qualities.

For instance, F. C. Bates of Local 113 in Muskegon, Michigan reverses the scab hereafter story and turns it into a scab creation story in his poem “The Creation of a Scab,” published in 1939. Here, God constructs a scab out of tidbits leftover from his worthier creations—and especially animals. The poem reads:

Well first he found a chicken’s heart and then a jackass brain,
A section of rhinoceros hide and a piece of lust for gain.

He found the venom of a snake, the courage of a mouse,
The morals of a polecat and the ethics of a louse,
The selfishness he used in swine [h]e found a lot of that,
He also found a goodly chunk of character of rat. (Bates, “The Creation of a Scab” 8)

Notably, Bates devotes particular attention to describing where God found the pieces of the scab’s immoral comportment. Similarly, a parodied version of “Mademoiselle from Armentières,” written and sang during the Flint Fisher Body plant occupation of 1937 includes the verse: “When a scab dies he goes to hell / The rats and skunks all ring the bell” (Maloney 5), evoking the image of company rats and skunks ringing church bells at a scab’s funeral.

Other poets depicted the depravity of the scab by positioning him as the speaker. For instance, a poem likely inspired by “At the Golden Gate,” picks up where the older poem leaves off. This version originally appeared in a mimeographed, stapled strike

bulletin published by workers involved in Detroit's 1937 Chrysler strike. In the poem a scab realizes that hell is imminent and prays for his own redemption. The poem, titled "A Scab's Prayer," reads:

Oh, Lord, wipe out that stain of shame,
Quench Thou that singeing flame
That's burning deep within my soul.
I know my brother's bread I stole
Tho I have repented oft' and well,
Wildly yawns the gates of HELL.
Oh Lord I pray, that if Thou can,
Make me once more a better man. (4)

The poem can be read two ways. In one reading, the scab is beyond divine rescue. In this sense, the "singeing flame" is literally "burning deep within [the scab's] soul" as he enters the gates of hell. In a more figurative reading the scab lives daily with "[t]hat stain of shame" and begs the Lord to forgive him before it is too late. In this reading, the scab still has a chance for redemption, although he has seen that "the gates of HELL" are open for him, as they "[w]ildly yawn" expecting his entrance. The dark humor of the poem stems from the futility of the scab's earnest prayer and the readers' *schadenfreude* at imagining the scab's just desserts. In terms of the moral flip that occurs in this poem, the scab realizes the error of his moral misjudgment, but it is too late. The poem's underlying message is that once someone has been a scab, he is a scab for life, and can never take back his actions.

While "The Creation of a Scab," the "Mademoiselle from Armentières" parody, and "A Scab's Prayer," are structured dramatically differently from "At The Golden Gate," they reach similar conclusions and impart similar judgments on the scab's selfishness and moral ineptitude. They also demonstrate just how imbedded the idea of the scab facing moral judgment in the hereafter was for unionizing autoworkers of the

Depression, and thus how flexible the trope could be for adaptation into other, quite different, textual treatments, even three decades following the appearance of the original parody.

Other versions from the era are much more recognizable as direct parodies of “At the Golden Gate.” In one such parody, also written by Bates in 1939, the scab character is replaced by Homer Martin, the UAW’s controversial first president, who was known for his charismatic speaking ability. In his poem, the speaker (who is presumably an autoworker) falls asleep in his chair to the sound of the radio and begins to dream. In the dream, Martin appears before St. Peter, who damns him to hell. In reaction, Martin calls St. Peter a Communist and yells so loud that he awakens the speaker from his nap. The speaker then realizes that his dream had been influenced by hearing Martin’s “nasal voice” being broadcast over the radio. At the time when the poem was published, Martin had recently resigned from the UAW-CIO amid charges that he lavishly spent union dues, sold out the UAW to the American Federation of Labor (the Congress of Industrial Organizations’ powerful rival), hired goons to clobber his political foes, and incessantly red-baited his enemies. In the parody, when Martin appears before St. Peter within the speaker’s dream, the saint tells him: “Once we folks up here in Heaven thought of you quite well. / Till you busted up the Union; now you’ll have to go to Hell.” (Bates 8). The lines that follow depict Martin’s reaction, in which he calls St. Peter a Communist and argues so loudly within the dream that the speaker awakens:

Homer showed his snowy molars and through them he fiercely hissed:
“Them there orders came from Moscaaw, you’re a dirty Communist.”
Then I knew my dream was ended tho’ the vision seemed to cling,
And it seemed that Martin’s nasal voice still in my ears did ring.
When my conscious mind, returning, brushed away the sleepy mists,
Homer on the air was blaring ’bout the dirty communists—(8)

In this version, the poem ascribes the scab's naïve misrecognition of a moral situation onto Martin, who continues to fight back with red-baiting. In the poem's narrative structure, the identities of Martin and the scab overlap, thus giving the reader a subconscious association between the actions of Martin and those of the depraved scab.

Similarly, an unpublished parody written during the Flint strike replaces the "scab" with Republican politician Alfred Landon. Landon had just lost the 1936 election to FDR in one of the most dramatic landslides in American history. In this parody, Landon stands at the Whitehouse Gate, rather than the holy gate. "The people" act in the role of St. Peter, barring Landon from entering. Landon tries to convince "the people" of his worthiness by denouncing Roosevelt's "New Deal ways." In lines that mimic those of the groveling scab, Landon pleads with "the people":

Of me, good people, there can be no doubt
There's nothing in Washington to bar me out
I've been to meetings three times a week
And almost always I raise and speak

I've told the people and about the day
When they'd repent of their new deal ways
I've told the [people] I've told them all
That President Roosevelt was bound to fall

He wraps up his argument by pledging loyalty to the likes of the Du Pont family, with the lines: "You will find that I was always content to live / With just whatever the Du Pont so cared to give" ("The People Stand at the Whitehouse Gate"). In this version, the scab fails to recognize that "the people" endorse Roosevelt's New Deal as being an aspect of the "correct" ethical code (at least within the scope of the narrative). I will pick up my discussion of these parodies in the next section.

Ethical foreclosures of “At the Golden Gate” and other parodies

In the final section of this chapter, I will describe how the reliance of “At the Golden Gate” on the sexist narrative of “St. Peter at the Gate” ultimately works counter to the parody’s potential emancipatory message fostering egalitarian cooperation among workers. I will also discuss how the chauvinistic subtext of the original poem extends into parodies penned by autoworkers in the 1930s. In many ways, “At the Golden Gate” benefited by virtue of being a parody of “St. Peter at the Gate.” Readers acquainted with the original already had a familiar starting point in terms of knowing the basic narrative structure of the original and perhaps recalling pleasure from laughing at this narrative. Readers unfamiliar with the original were still likely aware of jokes featuring St. Peter and could be hailed by merely seeing St. Peter’s name. Indeed, it seems that “At the Golden Gate”—which was nearly four decades old by the late 1930s, by far remained the most popular poem in the Depression-era labor movement. On its surface, the ethical code denouncing scabs implicit in the parody supports the practical aspects of strike operations; there is no doubt that scabbing workers undermine the effectiveness of strikes. The parody further promotes worker solidarity and egalitarian cooperation by disparaging the selfish behavior scab and implying that the harm he does to united workers struggling for improved conditions will be punished in the afterlife. Read in another way, though, the narrative structure of “St. Peter at the Gate” that undergirds “At the Golden Gate” also contradicts and somewhat forecloses the egalitarian theme of the parody.

To begin with, the very decision to parody “St. Peter at the Gate” endorses the patriarchal humor and sexist attitudes apparent in the original poem. Moreover, the

parody would have reminded many readers of the palimpsested original, a poem that's very structure hinges on patriarchal male bonding over an annoying shrew who is damned to hell for—among other transgressions—failing to perform the unpaid labor of supplying a cooked meal for her husband. In short, because the parody shares several lines of the original, the sexism of the original remains a shadow within the parody. For instance, in the original poem, Smiley plays into the stereotype of the wife as a talkative, know-it-all female. She tells St. Peter that she did all she could in life to warn “sinners,” including her “neighbors,” about the story of “Adam and Eve, and the Primal Fall.” Her statement makes her seem like an exhausting meddler:

I've shown them [the “sinners”] what they'd have to do
If they'd pass in with the chosen few.
I've marked their path of duty clear,—
Laid out the plan for their whole career.

I've talked and talked to 'em, loud and long.
For my lungs are good, and my voice is strong. (Smiley n.p.)

After this, she proceeds with her suggestions for St. Peter: that he should do a better job tending to the gate, get out of his “easy chair,” and cut his beard more tidily. All the while she assumes she will easily pass into the gates of heaven. To all this, St. Peter replies, “Who's tending this gateway,—you or I?” and instructs his imps to “Escort this female round to hell,” referring specifically to her gender. St. Peter then expresses deep sympathy for the husband, and is seemingly astonished that the man could endure the wife's incessant nagging for so long: “Thirty years with that tongue so sharp? / Ho! Angel Gabriel! Give him a harp!” (Smiley n.p.) The expression “sharp tongue,” applied most often to women, reinforces that the wife's flaw is her incessant female talking and badgering.

Notably, the Carroll version of the scab parody retains the lines in which the wife tells “sinners” about the “Primeval fall,” including the lines “I’ve talked to them loud and long— / For my lungs are good and my voice is strong” (246). But of course, in this version, the *scab* recites these lines, rather than the wife. Future editors would sometimes cut these lines from reprints of the parody, likely because their religious content lends little to the overall narrative. However, St. Peter’s reply—essential to the parody’s narrative arc—survives even in most later reprints: “I’ve heard of you and your gift of gab. You’re what is known on earth as a scab.”⁴³ Hence, in the parody, the wife’s stereotypical female attributes of talkativeness and meddling are attributed to the scab, and his stereotypically feminine “gift for gab” becomes part of the reason St. Peter gives for preparing to damn him.

The original “St. Peter at the Gate” further reinforces male supremacy when St. Peter takes up the side of the husband, expressing sympathy for the husband’s situation and marking him as a victim, while he is blinded to the narrative of the wife. In the parody, St. Peter is retained as the agent of a patriarchal God, further certifying the code of Christian patriarchy. By replacing the wife in the original poem with the scab in the parody, worker-parodists reinforce the idea of the scab as comparable to a feminized perpetrator, getting just desserts from the patriarchal St. Peter. Thus, the parody reinforces this gendered coding more generally. And the retention of this hierarchical structure within the parody partially forecloses the very anti-egalitarian system that “At the Golden Gate” purports to work against.

Given the vestiges of misogyny that remain in the anti-scab parody, then, what are we to make of the autoworker-authored adaptations of “At the Golden Gate,” so

commonly written during the Great Depression? Does the shadow of “St. Peter at the Gate” somewhat foreclose the egalitarian purpose of these parodies as well? In my summation, this depends on which parody we examine. In the last section, I described some derivations of “At the Golden Gate” that are quite different from their precursor. For instance, the “The Creation of a Scab” and “A Scab’s Prayer” are so dramatically transformed that they transmit very little, if any, of the anti-shew undercurrent of “At the Golden Gate.” On the other hand, poems that were much more overtly parodies of “At the Golden Gate” featuring other prominent figures—including former UAW president Homer Martin or failed presidential candidate Alfred Landon—much more overtly rely on stereotypical descriptions of the wife in “St. Peter at the Gate” to feminize and deride new figures. For instance, in the anti-Martin parody titled “A Dream,” Bates mocks Martin’s “gift of gab” with the speaker noting “it seemed that Martin’s nasal voice still in my ears did ring” as he awakens from his dream (8). Similarly, the anti-Landon poem contains a lengthy section in which Landon argues to “the people” that he should not be barred from entering the Whitehouse given his long track record of preaching to them about the evils of Roosevelt. With lines taken from both “The Golden Gate” and “St. Peter at the Gate,” he claims, “I talked to them loud and I’ve talked to them long / For my lungs are good and my [voice] is strong” (“The People Stand at the Whitehouse Gate”). These parodies recall the stereotype of the talkative, meddlesome women of “St. Peter at the Gate,” which remained an anthologized and oft-performed poem throughout the early twentieth century. Thus, the UAW parodists can rely on the popularity of both “St. Peter at the Gate” and “At the Golden Gate” to both attract readers and condemn prominent male figures for their “gift of gab.” It is interesting to note that both Martin and

Landon—within the scope of these parodies—are denounced for their anti-egalitarian ethos. While one might interpret both parodies as being pro-egalitarian, this message is somewhat undermined by the associations that readers would have made between either Martin or Landon and the stereotypically talkative shew in “St. Peter at the Gate.” The potentially egalitarian message of each poem is partially undermined when the poets mock these figures by emphasizing their stereotypically feminine, know-it-all personality traits.

In summation, my study demonstrates how unionizing autoworkers relied upon a popular labor parody in pursuit of readers within the Depression-era labor movement. Yet, even as parodists no doubt elicited laughter from readers while adapting the St. Peter story to UAW-specific situations—and even as they built upon a narrative that challenges hegemonic capitalist ideology—they nonetheless did so by mediating contradictory social forces of egalitarianism and patriarchy. Further, my tracing of the revision history of “St. Peter at the Gate” demonstrates how looking at a succession of revisions can reveal how structures and ideologies held in older versions of creative work can be absorbed into parodies—and thus applied to new contexts. In at least some cases, the residual meaning of the original can foreclose and contradict the message of the parody, so that the residual and emergent codes work at cross purposes. Further, as a cultural study, examining labor’s borrowing of “St. Peter at the Gate” reminds us of the porousness between worker-activism and other realms of American culture, including literary, religious, and civic life—historical spheres that are often studied separately. Tracing the life of a creative work through its parodies shows how the tropes and cultural practices of such spheres are perhaps more intertwined than we generally consider. Finally, my argument

demonstrates the richness of the material and cultural connections that can be discovered by investigating American parodic strains of the early twentieth century. There are, I believe, many other parodic strains yet to be discovered. My hope is that this study offers a glimpse into the potential scholarship that can be gleaned from looking for patterns in the role of “unoriginal” work in American culture more generally. In my next chapter, I will continue with my investigation of parodies within the labor movement by tracing the journey of a popular soldiers’ song from the European battlefields of WWI onto the picket lines of the Depression era.

CHAPTER 4

“HINKY DINKY”: FROM DOUGHBOY DITTY TO STRIKERS’ ANTHEM

This chapter traces how, in the 1930s, labor activists transformed a risqué doughboy song into a strikers’ anthem. “Mademoiselle from Armentières”—also called “Hinky-Dinky Parlez-Vous” or the cheekier “Hinky-Dinky Parlee-Voo,” after its nonsense refrain—had been wildly popular among American and British soldiers in World War I. By the 1930s, it predictably remained a favorite among veterans at American Legion events,⁴⁴ but it was also climbing what would become a second crest of popularity among Americans in the labor movement. As Woody Guthrie explained in *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People*, completed in 1941—but unpublished until 1967—“Parley-Vous used to be a war song. Now it’s broke loose in the union” (316; Roy 122).

Tracking this transformation reveals not only the journey of one song across geographic and ideological boundaries, but also provides a fascinating case study in terms of what Michael Denning has referred to as the “cultural front.” In *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (1997), Denning provides a breathtaking survey of the turn American culture took toward the left in the 1930s and argues that this turn had a profound influence on American culture throughout the remaining century. He finds the formation of the CIO to be central to this transformation. As I noted in the Introduction, I find that Denning’s focus on the CIO provides a tantalizing starting point for exploring how labor activists in particular were active participants in the shaping American popular culture. However, with the exception of his analysis of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union production of *Pins*

and Needles, he focuses most of his study on work by “cultural” workers, rather than the bulk of workers organizing in other industries. The rise of “Mademoiselle from Armentières” in the labor movement shows that cultural workers were not alone in shaping the twentieth-century American cultural landscape. The rank-and-file of the labor movement drew from popular and folk traditions to fashion new music that unified their fighting spirit, promoted their own perspectives, and put forth their own political agendas. In this sense, unionizing workers participated in creating the cultural front, rather than just consuming its productions.

While “Mademoiselle from Armentières” was a favorite of strikers, labor activists of the Great Depression considered *any* earlier cultural production to be fair game for adaptation and recreation. Indeed, the writing of song parodies has long been a tradition of labor activism, as Philip S. Foner amply demonstrated in his collection *American Labor Songs of the Nineteenth Century*. Activist workers continued the parody-writing tradition into the 1930s by riffing on songs including “Yankee Doodle,” the Civil War song “Tramp, Tramp, Tramp, The Boys are Marching,” as well as “The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze,” “Jingle Bells,” and “It Ain’t Gonna Rain No More,” to name a small few. Given the common practice of adaptation of popular songs among striking workers, the study I have undertaken may seem arbitrary. However, “Hinky-Dinky Parlez Vous” is unique in that it was considered a song that *invited* verse improvisation in a number of contexts, even beyond labor circles. While there are many alternatives, no definitive version exists. It was understood that singers were to take turns spontaneously writing and rewriting verses, and this was a practice that was ubiquitous in inter-war American culture. Given the democratic writing of this song, it had an

incredible capacity to take up the thoughts, moods, humor, and political ideologies of anyone and everyone who re-created it. As lyric compiler John T. Winterich writes, the song's "adaptability to improvisation" is an "obvious explanation of Hinky Dinky's popularity" (59). He also writes that, "It is, of course, not a song, but a whole anthology" (51).

While the scant scholarly study that has been done on "Mademoiselle from Armentières" has focused on verses written by soldiers, the song's second life in the labor movement has not yet been studied. Looking back at how the song continued evolving through the Great Depression informs our perceptions of the generation of workers who staged a massive, class-based protest against American companies in the 1930s. Those who waged the class struggle of the 1930s were, the study of "Mademoiselle from Armentières" reminds us, often also veterans of World War I—who claimed the song as generational anthem. By following the trail of the song from WWI into the labor movement, we can track a generational movement into the European theater and back home again. Through the song, we find the same generation protesting prohibition, becoming Bonus Marchers and hunger strikers in the early 1930s, and eventually, sit-downers in the late 30s. They passed the song down to their children, who composed their own verses in schoolyards and, at times, sang it in solidarity with their protesting elders. Although Americans have mostly forgotten the "Mademoiselle" today, this was a song that had a profound influence on American popular and folk culture and was an integral aspect of the 1930s picket line and sit-down. Its travel highlights the mobility of economically struggling Americans, as well as their adeptness at circulating working-class cultural capital among a myriad of events and circumstances.

To fill in the gaps of the song's history, I have tracked down many versions of the "Mademoiselle from Armentières" from both primary and secondary sources. The variety of examples I have found show just how frequently striking workers sang this song and incorporated it into picket line pageantry. As I will demonstrate, "Mademoiselle from Armentières" often evolved from one rendering to the next. While my purpose in Chapter 3 was to show how the ethical code of an original poem can partially foreclose the meanings of its parodies, my purpose in this chapter is, in part, to show how labor song parodies can virtually *map* the initiatives, emotions, and humor of working-class activists through time and across geographical space.

In mapping the travel of parodies in this way, we can make new assertions about circulation of ideas among various groups, as well as see how patterns emerged and disappeared based on evolving situations. Such a study further allows us to test narrative theories about the circulation of music and lyrics among working-class people and to see what gaps might exist in our understanding of such narratives. In this chapter, for instance, I show how various instances of "Mademoiselle from Armentières" both confirm and expand our thinking about the influence of radical politics on the spread of American folk music in the twentieth century. We can also see, from *who* rewrote and sang this parody, the interconnections between northern and Southern activists as well as Bonus Marchers and veterans.

The *mapping* aspect of my approach has some conceptual overlap with Franco Moretti's methodology in *Graphs Maps Trees* (2005). Moretti argues that literary scholars have much to learn from a "quantitative approach to literature," by demonstrating the sorts of information that can be gleaned by simply graphing and

mapping information about literary works. For instance, he maps the rise of the novel in various countries, and the rise and fall of certain types of British novels, in particular. Simply seeing literary trends accounted for on a graph, he argues, illuminates information about when and where certain types of literary works were being written and when they fell out of favor. Such data allows scholars to glean larger trends that “place the literary field literally in front of our eyes—and show us how little we still know about it” (2).

This sort of quantitative approach to literature is certainly aided by the growth of more sophisticated databases and creative approaches to mining digital archives. When constructing a history of “*Mademoiselle from Armentières*,” I drew from searchable digital archival material as well as less-easily-searchable microfilm and archival files. By necessity, I have concentrated my search on a limited percentage of the large volume of union and popular publications that would have potentially printed this song in the early twentieth century. With the advance of technology, as well as the growing amount of material available to the public online, one anticipates that researchers of the future can create even more robust and informative maps of parody instances. If someone were to continue the search for parodies of “*Mademoiselle from Armentières*” in ten or twenty years, for example, this map will be all the more complete and revealing.

A final aspect of this study compares parodies of “*Mademoiselle from Armentières*”—a song that was widely popular among Depression-era worker activists—to what Michael Denning has called the “proletarian grotesque.” As opposed to social realism, which he finds to be a problematic term, Denning finds the proletarian grotesque to be the dominant style of leftist proletarian-focused artists of the Depression. By comparing labor versions of “*Mademoiselle from Armentières*” to the proletarian

grotesque, we can more easily speculate about which aspects of a popular song parody were attractive to organizing workers.

Origins: the making of a classic war song

One reason the “Mademoiselle from Armentières” has had such longevity is because it is so easy to learn. And the tune is insidiously catchy. In standard versions, it begins with a line followed by “parlez-vous.” The first line then repeats, again followed by “parlez-vous.” This is followed by the first line yet again, and then a new rhyming line, which usually serves as a humorous punch line. The final line is the nonsense phrase, “Hinky dinky parlez-vous” or sometimes “Inky dinky parlez-vous.” A common soldiers’ version has the following lyrics, (except that one presumes the soldiers offered a variation on the word “kissed”⁴⁵):

Oh, Mademoiselle from Armentières,
Parlez-vous,
Oh, Mademoiselle from Armentières,
Parlez-vous,
Oh, Mademoiselle from Armentières,
She hasn’t been kissed in forty years,
Hinky dinky parlez-vous. (qtd. in Cary 373)

All one need to do to compose a new verse is devise a witty, rhyming couplet that could take the form of an inside joke or a comment on current circumstances. In a group, each member could take a turn adding additional verses, which could easily be picked up by other singers. Columnist Jean Newton, in 1941, chalked the song’s longevity up to its combination of recognizable and ineffable components: “Sentiment, nonsense and rhythm seem to be in the magic, mystic ingredients; but this is an esoteric formula which, only the spark of genius—oftener than not anonymous, as here—occasionally lights into the roaring flame of a song hit” (6). In a sense, the song’s form *allowed* the “spark of

genius” in the amateur composer to unite his or her creative impulses with a ready-made tune. This could be done without instruments, pen or paper. All that was necessary was a receptive audience and the nerve to test out new jokes.

While no one really knows who wrote “Mademoiselle from Armentières,”⁴⁶ scholars have suggested many predecessors, and I will describe a few. Bertrand H. Bronson, writing for the *California Folklore Quarterly* in 1944 dates the refrain pattern back to a morality play by William Wagner titled *The Longer Thou Livest the More Fool Thou*, which Bronson finds was written “around 1568.” This ballad is sung by one of the play’s characters, named Moros, who has been hanging around taverns where he has learned “snatches from popular songs” (192). In the context of the play, one of these songs has the following lyrics:

There was a mayde cam out of Kent,
Daintie loue, daintie loue,
There was a mayde cam out of Kent,
Daungerous be:
There was a mayde cam out of Kent,
Fayre, proper, small and gent,
As euer vpon the ground went,
For so should it be (qtd. in Bronson 192).

Given that “Daintie loue” rhymes with “parley-vous” and that the song suggests a sexually promiscuous woman, as well as her town of origin, the lyric’s connections to “Mademoiselle from Armentières,” seem likely. The ballad’s earliest antecedents, then, already reveled in bawdy, comic lyrics.

The song has also been tied to “Die Die Reiter,” a German students’ song from the 1500s, (Gordon xxxii). Additionally, Melbert B. Cary, Jr., a song collector who published two volumes of “Mademoiselle from Armentières” variations in 1930 and 1935 respectively, remarked on the song’s similarity to the German song “Der Wirthin

Töchterlein,” and, in particular, the English “Skiboo,” which dates at least as far back as the late nineteenth century. “Skiboo” has a similar structure to “Mademoiselle from Armentières,” except that its chorus is the much more complicated: “Skiboo, Skiboo, Skiboodleyboo, Skidam, dam, dam” (Cary, *Mademoiselle* ix; Cary, “Mademoiselle” 369, 370; Gordon xxxv-xxxviii). As with some versions of “Mademoiselle from Armentières,” “Skiboo” also begins with the verse, “Two German officers crossed the Rhine / To love the women and taste the wine” (Cary, *Mademoiselle* xii). One of the more fascinating proposed antecedents of “Mademoiselle from Armentières” is the haunting “When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again.” The American Civil War song shares the same tune as “Mademoiselle from Armentières,” except that “Johnny” is in a minor key, and “Mademoiselle” is in a major one. The minor key version is also the tune of an older Irish anti-war song, “Johnny, I Hardly Knew Ye,” adapted in the United States as the folk song “The Runaway Train” (Gordon xxxviii-xliv; Randolph 254, 515).

Whatever the various origins of the song, it is widely agreed upon that American soldiers learned a later version from the Brits in WWI and quickly started adapting it, inventing new verses. “The song grew exuberantly and spontaneously,” wrote Cary for *The Journal of American Folklore* in 1934. “No one will ever know how many verses were improvised, sung and subsequently lost, but they numbered thousands, for almost every unit contributed its quota” (370). Some soldiers’ versions included:

She’d neck, she’d kiss, she’d smoke, she’d chew,
There ain’t nothing she wouldn’t do (Cary, *Mademoiselle* 4)

She’s the hardest-working girl in town,
But she makes her living upside down! (Winterich 12)

She was always happy when puffing a fag,
Loving a Marine or out on a jag. (Cary, *Mademoiselle* 17)

She might have been young for all we knew
When Napoleon flopped at Waterloo. (Cary, *Mademoiselle* 22)

She could drink a barrel, there is no doubt,
She was going strong when I passed out. (Cary, *Mademoiselle* 28)

(Of the Mademoiselle from Gay Paree)
The only thing that she gave free
The doctors took away from me! (Winterich 27)

While the song was known for its risqué verses featuring soldiers and French women, soldiers also composed versions about a range of other topics that pertained to their daily lives. As Edward A. Dolph explained in his 1929 collection of American soldiers' songs, "Mademoiselle from Armentières" "had become a vehicle for comment not only on the beauty and generosity of the ma 'm 'selle herself, but also on everything else from the rarity of French customs to the activities of the Y.M.C.A and the courage of commanding generals" (82).

But the verses did more than celebrate the "courage" of officers. Dozens of versions also made officers the butt of jokes, promoting a military version of class-consciousness. Pointing out the superiority of rations for officers and deriding lazy cowardice among the highly ranked, these were the forerunners to songs that labor-activist songwriters composed decades later. Examples include:

The General won the Croix de Guerre,
But the son of a bitch wasn't even there. (Cary, "Mademoiselle from Armentières" 371).

The officers get the pie and cake,
And all we get is the belly-ache. (Cary, "Mademoiselle from Armentières" 371).

The Captain is a bloody funk,
He's yellow sober and worse when drunk. (Cary, "Mademoiselle from Armentières" 371).

These verses show how the rank-and-file had to tolerate incompetence from those of higher standing. That this sort of class-based taunting of officers would show up in the lyrics of doughboys might be expected, considering that officers came from a social class that had received more pre-war educational opportunities than did the regular soldiers. World War I doughboys were often young men who had grown up on farms. As historian Fred D. Baldwin has written, most soldiers had fewer than “seven years of schooling,” while “[b]y contrast, most officers had some college work” (432-33).

Even as the officers were likely chagrined by soldiers’ songs that mocked them, the versions of “Hinky Dinky” with highly sexual themes were officially suppressed. Doughboys were discouraged from singing songs with sexual content by official military channels, as well as by the Y.M.C.A. (Trombold 296-97, fn 37), which established “wholesome” recreational pastimes for soldiers to keep them away from brothels (Trombold 292, Baldwin 437). This sanction made the subversive verses of “Mademoiselle from Armentières” all that more pleasurable to sing, but also firmly established the song’s characterization as subversive—a distinction that would follow the song for years to come.

Following the war, “Mademoiselle from Armentières” continued to be sung wherever veterans gathered. Even as the song transitioned from being a soldiers’ song to a veterans’ song, it acquired new verses, pertinent to daily life after the war. One self-referential version, in particular, demonstrates the extent to which former soldiers identified with the song and used it to maintain camaraderie among fellow veterans after the war: “To find a buddy in a crowd, / Sing ‘Hinky-Dinky’ right out loud” (qtd. in Dolph 86).

The song's emergent political turn can be seen in the many verses written to protest prohibition (see Cary, "Mademoiselle" 357). One of these points out the unfairness of prohibition being enacted while scores of American soldiers were still in Europe.⁴⁷ This anti-prohibition version of the song is as follows:

They sent us over to France to die,
Parlez-vous,
They sent us over to France to die,
Parlez-vous,
We left our women to weep and cry,
And then they voted the U.S. dry,
Hinky dinky parlez-vous. (Cary, *Mademoiselle* 60)

Several of the anti-prohibition versions leave the war behind entirely, taking up subjects related to home-production of alcohol. One is a semi-brag and semi-self-reproach regarding the singer's homebrew prowess: "They say home-brew is puny stuff / But mine would make a lambkin rough" (Dolph 86). The most notable aspect of these anti-prohibition songs is that they continue "Mademoiselle from Armentières's" anti-authoritarian stance and humor, while also becoming a notch more politically engaged than the military versions. Many of these verses, although jocular in tone, concern the government suppression of the rights of American citizens. Moreover, they assume an audience of like-minded (presumably male) drinkers with the "they" of the first example implying lawmakers and teetotalers were outside of the post-war fraternal community of veterans.

The post-war years were also a time when a younger generation started picking up the song, both from their elders and from popular culture. As Ozark folklorist Vance Randolph recalls, "Mademoiselle from Armentières" was "popular throughout the 1920s in America among children and adolescents, who learned the song from their fathers and

older brothers returning from the War” (514).⁴⁸ In the 1920s, the song was also a standard of musical performance. For instance, Jan Garber and His Orchestra played a fox trot version, which Victrola advertised as one of several “Dance Records” in 1924 (“Out today: New Victor Records” 3). In 1926, the British film *Mademoiselle from Armentieres* premiered, capitalizing on the popularity of the war song; this was a silent film about a French woman who fell in love with an English soldier, following him to the front lines (*Mademoiselle from Armentieres*, British Film Institute). By 1927, the song was already enough of a “people’s” classic in the United States that Carl Sandburg included it in his *American Song Bag*, a book of traditional standards and folk songs (440). *American Song Bag*, perhaps unsurprisingly given Sandburg’s political leanings, includes one of the soldiers’ versions that looked ahead to the song’s appropriation by the class struggle of the 1930s. In this verse, “The officers get all the steak, And all we get is the belly-ache” (441).

An important transitional moment in the veterans’ transformation of “Mademoiselle from Armentières” from a war song into a codified protest song was its evocation during the Bonus Army occupation of Washington in 1932. The government had already promised veterans war bonuses in 1924. However, Congress stipulated that veterans could not collect the money until 1945—unless a veteran died, in which case his heirs could receive the payment immediately. The veterans argued that the economy was so bad off that they needed the money at once (Dickson and Allen 1-2, 5). What began as band of 280 veterans hopping freight cars from Oregon to D.C. led by former sergeant Walter W. Waters, eventually coalesced into a national protest movement. Thousands nationwide descended upon the capital, wearing their threadbare uniforms and carrying

American flags. Estimates of the number of veterans who occupied the city in the summer of 1932, living in a massive tent colony or in abandoned buildings, ranged from 21,100 to more than 28,000.⁴⁹ (Dickson and Allen 62, 136-37 and 319 fn10).

Indeed, this was a moment when veterans themselves participated—as *veterans*—in a mass movement of civil disobedience. Naturally, they rewrote their old war song in service of their new political goals and outlook. In one instance, railroad officials barred the Oregon contingent (who were on their way to Washington) from riding a freight train out of St. Louis (Dickson and Allen 68-72). As a peaceful standoff ensued, the veterans sang hopefully: “We’re going to ride the B&O / The Good Lord Jesus told us so” (qtd. in Dickson and Allen 75).⁵⁰ When it turned out that railroad officials remained adamant, local volunteers piled the veterans into private cars and trucks and drove them in a caravan to their next destination. Commemorating the moment, the veterans wrote an additional verse implying that President Herbert Hoover was behind their trouble with St. Louis railroad officials: “We didn’t ride the B&O. / The good Lord Hoover told us so” (qtd. in Dickson and Allen 75).

Bonus Army versions of “Mademoiselle from Armentières” also included: “You’re gonna see a better day / When Mr. Hoover says O.K.” and “We’re all the way from Oregon / To get some cash from Washington” (qtd. in Waters and White 99). These lyrics direct hopeful focus on the movement’s endeavor. As they did in the war, the veterans made up verses that pertained to the events around them, even as these events unfolded. President Hoover had replaced both the mademoiselle and military officers as the butt of jokes. In this respect, Hoover was alternately cast as the man who could change their lot and the bogymen responsible for their troubles.

Class-consciousness in Gastonia

However political the Bonus Marchers made “Mademoiselle from Armentières” in 1932, the song’s use as a strike song predates the Bonus March by at least three years. Eleven-year-old Odel Corley, who participated in the bloody textile strike in Gastonia, North Carolina of 1929, is credited with the earliest labor-oriented version of “Mademoiselle from Armentières” that I have come across. Gastonia’s Loray Mill textile strike began as the result of abysmal working conditions⁵¹ that attracted the attention of an organizer for the Communist-affiliated National Textile Workers Union (NTWU), the organization that eventually led the workers in a strike (Lynch 17, Salmond 14-23). The events of the strike were so dramatic that at least six novelists in the early 1930s wrote books loosely based on what occurred.⁵² Vigilantes destroyed the union’s headquarters, and later—when unionists attempted a picket—police invaded the tent colony where families evicted from company housing had been living. A police chief was killed in the mêlée that ensued. In response to the death of the police chief, an angry mob destroyed the tent village; inhabitants fled to the woods or were arrested (Lynch 30, 33). The strike was ultimately lost.

Aside from the violence, the strike is recalled today for the significant role that music played in uniting the strikers. Ella May,⁵³ a local composer, singer, and mother of five, is the Loray Mill’s most celebrated striker, but also a tragic figure. In one incident, vigilantes fired on a truckload of unionists who were on their way to a meeting. In the truck and pregnant at the time, May was shot and killed. While May is a well-known martyr of the strike, other female strikers also wrote and regularly performed songs for fellow workers and organizers. They frequently adapted pro-striker lyrics to traditional

music and performed for fellow strikers. The “frail” Odel Corley was one of them (Salmond 51, 61-63, 128, 130-31 Lynch 12, 14, 41; “Strike Songs Show the Spirit of Mill Hands” 4). Much less is known about Corley than is known about May, but Corley’s version of “Mademoiselle from Armentières” survives. Given the popularity of “Mademoiselle from Armentières” among children of the 1920s, and the fact that the song was often sung for improvisational purposes, Corley would have naturally turned to it for composing her own strike song. Her version was sung:

I bought a scab for fifty cents, parlie voo,
I bought a scab for fifty cents, parlie voo,
I bought a scab for fifty cents,
The son of a gun jumped over the fence,
Hinky Dinky, parlie voo. (qtd. in Lynch 31; “Strike Songs Show the Spirit of Mill Hands” 4)

Throughout the strike, the identities of strikers and scabs remained somewhat fluid, as desperate strikers sometimes went back to work and then returned to the picket. It was amid these circumstances that Corley wrote the line “I bought a scab for fifty cents, parlie voo” (Lynch 32). According to Timothy P. Lynch, author of *Strike Songs of Depression*, this unusual lack of distinction between workers and scabs was partly brought on by kinship relations between workers; strikers were willing to allow scabs who stopped scabbing back into the fold. As Lynch writes, “A scab was viewed as a potential striker; all he or she needed was some friendly persuasion” (32). Since Corley likely thought that buying a scab so cheaply was an amusing joke, we see just how little the bosses were respected by the workers, and how little workers were paid. However, what is perhaps the most significant aspect of this version is its distinction from earlier recorded versions of “Mademoiselle from Armentières.” Here, young Corley uses the discourse of a veteran union member, calling those who work during strikes “scabs.” She also captures the

emergent nature of class-consciousness in Gastonia by showing that a Loray Mill striker would consider a scab someone who could be persuaded, rather than simply someone to be scorned. Later versions of “Mademoiselle from Armentières” would not take so kindly to scabs, as I will discuss.

Another possibly significant aspect of Corley’s version of “Mademoiselle from Armentières” is that it appeared in the *Daily Worker* in July of 1929, under the headline “Strike Songs Show Spirit of Mill Hands.” The *Daily Worker* closely followed the unfolding events of the Loray Mill strike and profiled striking workers. Indeed, this is how Corley’s version of “Mademoiselle from Armentières” survives today. The article describes Corley as “an 11-year-old child of a striker, tiny, [and] half-starved” (“Strike Songs Show the Spirit of Mill Hands” 4). Further, the article reports that strikers’ children often sang Corley’s songs and that “any evening in the tent colony, you can hear them singing in the typical ‘blues’ melody of the south” (“Strike Songs Show the Spirit of Mill Hands” 4). As I will describe further, the publication of her song in the *Daily Worker* is emblematic of what was to become a trend toward leftist journalists and organizers “discovering” and promoting protest music performed by rural strikers—and bringing these songs to a wider audience.

“The cops are having a helluva time”

On July 10, 1931, strikers of the General Fabrics Company in Central Falls, Rhode Island found themselves in an early-morning confrontation with police.⁵⁴ The day before, clashes between police and strikers had grown intense, as picketers confronted scabs leaving the mill. After two picketers were arrested, strikers pried open a police car door, allowing one detained man to escape. When the day was over and the tear gas had

cleared, it appeared that every window of the General Fabrics mill had been broken (“Tear Gas Used” 3). The morning of July 10 was less heated until a man drove down an alleyway leading to a plant entrance. Thinking the man was a scab, strikers picked up rocks and threw them at the car. As it turned out, the man was not a General Fabrics scab and was unhurt. Police, nonetheless, stood guard at the alleyway waiting for whatever came next. But instead of escalating the tension, the strikers started singing. Their lyrics provided an apt comment on the current situation: “The police are having a helluva time, trying to break the picket line” (“Tear Gas Used” 3; Hughes 47). Then something truly surprising occurred. The officers smiled, recognizing the tune, and perhaps the truthfulness of the comment. And their reaction had an effect on the strikers. According to a newspaper reporter from *The Evening Bulletin*, “Gradually the faces of the singers broke into grins and the tenseness abated” (“Tear Gas Used” 3).

The General Fabrics strike, which had organizing support from the Communist-affiliated National Textile Workers Union, marks one of the first reported moments that the “Mademoiselle from Armentières” was sung collectively on the picket line during a clash with police. The police’s reaction to the song shows that the lines “The police are having a helluva time, trying to break the picket line” were unexpected, but they wouldn’t be so for much longer. In the early 1930s, this new verse of “Mademoiselle from Armentières” became codified to a certain extent; in this version, workers frequently sang about police—or someone else—having “a helluva time” with strikers or protesters.

Another instance of protesters singing this verse occurred in 1932. The *New York Times* describes a “pretty young girl” who was “an unemployed stenographer,” from

Worcester, Massachusetts. She reportedly led a group of hunger marchers with this version:

Hoover's Having a helluva time.
Trying to stop the hunger line.
Hinkey Dinky—Parlez-Vous! ("Red 'Hunger March'" 3, Hughes 50)

The pretty stenographer was one of some 600 hunger marchers headed from New England to Washington that December. It is notable that this "helluva time" version is reminiscent of a frequent verse construction of the WWI soldier's "Mademoiselle from Armentières," in which someone is said to be having a "hell of a time" or a "helluva time" in relation to the front "line" or keeping men "in line," rather than in relation to a "picket-line." For example, in one soldiers' version, "The M. P.'s had a hellava time / Keeping the doughboys in the line" (Cary, *Mademoiselle*, 60; vol. 2).

Perhaps the strangest variation of the "helluva time" construction was either written or collected by the radical film critic Harry Alan Potamkin, in his compilation of revolutionary children's songs titled the *Pioneer Song Book: Songs for Workers' and Farmers' Children*. In this book, published in 1933 after Potamkin's death, the "Mademoiselle from Armentières" parody reads:

The kids are having a peach of a time, parlez vous,
The kids are having a peach of a time
Kicking the cops from the picket line,
Hinky dinky, parlez vous. (qtd. in Small 5; qtd. in Reuss and Reuss 43)

Reviewing the book for the *Daily Worker*, Sasha Small imagined a scenario in which the "peach of a time" song would be sung: "Children, tired and worn, walking beside their tired and worn parents on the picket line, staring back defiantly at the cops, needing something to show their defiance want to sing [this song]" (5). In one respect, the song is sanitized in that it does not contain the word "hell"—which is replaced by the much more

innocent “peach.” On the other, it advocates for children participating in violence against police officers on the picket line, somewhat negating the first sanitation, especially given the real danger of this prospect for children, in particular.

Nevertheless, the “helluva time” construction also became one aspect of what seems to have been a growing awareness of the picket line as performance space, replete with costumes and drama. Such pageantry is apparent in a description of the 1933 Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America strike against Keller-Heumann-Thompson in Rochester, N.Y. In this case, strikers involved the gas mask iconography of WWI soldiers. Activist Charles W. Ervin, writing for the ACWA’s organ *The Advance*, provides an account of the strike, which was ultimately victorious. According to Ervin, a police captain told his men to expel tear gas at the strikers “from an exhaust of a motorcycle” (8). In response, the ACWA requested that Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins provide the strikers with 500 gas masks to safeguard strikers from any future use of tear gas. Perkins’s reply is uncertain, but the workers themselves, with several WWI veterans among them, soon managed to round up several gas masks to wear on the picket line. The resulting newspaper photographs had just the desired effect. Ervin’s delight at the outcome is plain from his description of what happened next: “Into the mails went the photographs to appear all over the country, and out went the further use of tear-gas in the strike” (8).

Ervin reports that ACWA organizer Dorothy Bellanca kept up the morale of Keller-Heumann-Thompson workers by leading them with a strike song that (according to Ervin) was first used in organizing workers of Elizabeth, New Jersey. Although the song’s lyrics sung in this strike were not written onsite, it is worth mentioning that the

strikers' enthusiasm for it was even infectious for Ervin, who reports that "[t]he song caused my feet to beat the pavement in unison with the voices" (9). He goes on to describe the song as "the real musical note of the strike," and to observe strikers "seeming to get relief from their weary tramping as they sing it" (9). Ervin also artfully describes how Bellanca seemed to dance as she led the strikers: "Her lithe figure waves from side to side with a graceful lilt as she leads the pickets" singing the song from Elizabeth:

The bosses are getting it on the chin, parlez vous,
The bosses are getting it on the chin, parlez vous,
The bosses are getting it on the chin
Because the strikers won't give in,
Hinky, dinky, parlez vous.

The cops are having a hell of a time, parlez vous,
The cops are having a hell of a time, parlez vous,
The cops are having a hell of a time
To keep us off the picket line,
Hinky, dinky, parlez vous. (Ervin 9)

The lyrics describe the moment at hand, framing the strikers into the role of Greek chorus, declaring the difficulty they are causing both their bosses and the cops, as the drama of the strike—replete with costumes—unfolded.

The role of singing in the theater of the picket line is even more apparent at another strike where strikers evoked "Mademoiselle from Armentières" in direct opposition to the police. Longtime International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union activist Rose Pesotta, in her autobiography, described the events of a four-mill textile strike in Cleveland that occurred in 1937. At the time, workers in the four plants complained that their bosses were pressuring them to join the American Federation of Labor, which they feared had been co-opted into a company union. So rather than go

along with the plan, workers struck all four mills (Pesotta 280). Pesotta, an experienced organizer, was sent as a representative to the Federal factory (284).

At Federal, the strikers were told by a police captain to refrain from singing, since they were disturbing the scabbing workers. Rather than comply, the organizers called in strikers from other mills and arranged a plan. Eight at a time, groups of picketers paced in front of Federal, singing with gusto. Each group sang for a few minutes before being arrested; immediately after the one group was arrested, the next group of eight would take their places until they, too, were arrested, and so on. All told, the police arrested seventy-four singers (296-97). As Pesotta recalled, the repertoire was different from group to group: “Succeeding groups varied the songs, bringing in *The Star Spangled Banner*, *Solidarity Forever*, and *Marching Through Georgia*” (297-97). But one song in particular caught the attention of those gathered to watch the drama unfold: “[A] parody on *Mademoiselle from Armentiers* [sic] got a big laugh from the onlookers,” she writes, recording the lyrics sung that day as:

The cops are having a helluva time, parley-voo,
Trying to break our picket-line;
Hinky-dinky parley-voo. (Pesotta 297)

The singing spectacle had the desired effect, and Pesotta describes it in theatrical terms. “Now nobody was doing any work in the Federal mill,” Pesotta recalled. “Scabs and bosses crowded together in the doorway and at the windows. Our pickets and the police provided a free show for them, for pedestrians, neighborhood children and riders on passing street cars” (292). Once again, the strikers provided direct commentary on the difficulty of the cops and reinforced the actions of the strikers. In this drama, the strikers held the upper hand, and the police simply played the roles the strikers expected them to

play. The song mocked the predictability of the officers' actions, even as the singing act itself made the situation such a "helluva time" for the police in the first place. The laughter from the onlookers is also telling. These onlookers, who already associated the "Mademoiselle from Armentières" with humorous lyrics, were all the more likely to find the humor in the actions of police, when these actions were sung to this particular tune; by using this particular song, the strikers were able to connect with their audience rhetorically, gaining their vocal support.

Migration and circulation

It is tempting to speculate about the origin of the labor versions of "Mademoiselle from Armentières," and how they spread from strike to strike. Although we cannot be certain how "Mademoiselle from Armentières" and other songs from the labor movement moved from location to location, several factors were likely at play, including circulation between networks of workers and organizers, the mobility of workers and organizers themselves, and both radical and New Deal cultural projects.

One question that arises in relation to the proliferation of "Mademoiselle from Armentières" in the labor movement of the early 1930s is whether Communist directives toward the left fostered its proliferation. The question is especially provocative given the role of Communist organizers in textile, coal, and other strikes in the early 1930s. For instance, Communist Party-affiliated unions had a direct role in organizing strikes in both Gastonia and Central Falls, and communist-sympathetic organizers played key roles in organizing unions and strikes of the CIO. The actual trajectory of the "Mademoiselle from Armentières" illustrates that the repertoire of songs protesting workers sang in Depression was—at least at first—quite different from songs written and encouraged by

communist intellectuals. However, the role of folk music in party initiatives grew as an aspect of the the Popular Front, anti-fascist movement—particularly after 1934. In this respect, as I will elaborate in this section, it is reasonable to conclude that communist-affiliated organizers and sympathizers played a role in circulating existing verses and encouraging strikers to continue adding new ones. Even more interesting, as I will describe, my quest for an answer to this question has lead me to an alternative narrative about the development of “folk” culture within the United States more generally.

Richard A. and JoAnne C. Reuss, authors of *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics, 1927-1957*, provide a detailed history of the rise of popular folk music in the twentieth century, and their narrative gives us useful context for understanding the circulation of “Mademoiselle from Armentières.” For the next few pages, I will summarize this history and show how my study of “Mademoiselle from Armentières” both confirms this narrative and shows how boundaries concerning what is considered “folk” music (and what is not) have influenced our received history of music written and performed by working-class people during the Great Depression. First, *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics* itself requires some explanation. It is the updated 1971 doctoral dissertation (from Indiana University) of folklorist Richard Reuss. In the years after Reuss completed his dissertation, it became a consummate text for folklorists interested in the relationship between American folk music and the politics of the left. However, Reuss died in 1986, before he could see his dissertation though to publication. In the years that followed, his wife JoAnne Reuss, although untrained as a scholar, took on the immense task of updating his text, which was finally published by The Scarecrow Press in 2000 (Cohen, Smith, and Kahn vii). I rely on this history for two reasons. First, it

remains “a rich resource for subsequent scholars” on how the left influenced American folk music in the twentieth century (Roy 253 fn. 7; see also, Roy 113). Secondly, its biases—informed by interviews with large-looming figures of the late twentieth-century folk revival, such as Alan Lomax and Pete Seeger—remain part of our received history concerning the differences between Southern and northern labor music. This history is thus worth further examination.

While I find Reuss and Reuss’s synthesis of the movement to be invaluable for understanding how concurrent forces circulated and promoted labor songs in the Great Depression, their analysis treats workers themselves as static entities—while in reality, many workers were on the move throughout the Depression, no doubt bringing their songs and home cultures with them. Further, as I will describe, their conception of what constitutes “folk” music—reflecting the attitudes of mid-century purveyors of folk culture—somewhat obscures the cultural productions of many working-class labor activists within the United States, and especially those living in regions outside the American South.

According to Reuss and Reuss, folk music was not a particularly integral aspect of the American communist movement in the early 1920s. While communist Eastern European immigrant communities brought with them traditions of organizing revolutionary choral groups, these choruses generally favored music of their native languages, and songs that most Americans considered esoteric and overwrought, even when translated into English. The year 1928 marked the beginning of the Communist International’s radical “Third Period,” which focused on accelerating the demise of capitalism, thought to be in its final throes. Under the Third Period, communist-

influenced artistic efforts moved decidedly toward agit-prop. American middle-class leftist musicians and other artists began sorting out the meaning of “proletarian art” as they joined organizations such as John Reed Clubs, the Workers Music League, and the Composers’ Collective (Reuss and Reuss 41-44).

The search for a new form of proletarian art sometimes led composers to write difficult music that was less than appealing to the would-be organized. For instance, Reuss and Reuss give considerable attention to describing the Composers’ Collective, a group of New York musicians and composers, including Elie Siegmeister, Charles Seeger (father of late-twentieth-century folk singer Pete Seeger), and “on the periphery, such luminaries as Aaron Copeland” (Reuss and Reuss 44). The principled purpose of the Composers’ Collective, founded in 1932, was revolutionary. In line with Third Period thinking, they strove to create a new music specifically for the working class, which could not be reproduced outside the proletariat. As Reuss and Reuss explain,

On one occasion, for instance, Charles Seeger, describing an Elie Siegmeister composition alternating four/four and five/eight meter, noted that it was apt to cause technical performance difficulties for most bourgeois singing groups, but ‘workers’ choruses that have tried it do not have any trouble (45).

As might be expected given their focus on new musical forms, the group had little interest in easily adaptable, collectively-written popular songs such as the “Mademoiselle from Armentières.” They largely condemned traditional American music for being overly propagandistic, patriotic, pessimistic, and dulling to the workers’ revolutionary impulses (Reuss and Reuss 48-9). Hence, rather than music that would have sounded familiar and inviting to American listeners, the Collective favored “dissonant melody lines and irregular meters” in an effort to write a “‘unique’ workers’ music” (47).⁵⁵ Denning, likewise, highlights the idea that the Composers’ Collective has been “caricatured as

hopelessly out of touch, attempting to compose radical songs for ‘ordinary’ workers” (293).⁵⁶

However, the Popular Front—for which the All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers meeting of 1934 was an important initiating moment—marked a change in the sentiment of intellectual communists toward traditional folk music (Reuss and Reuss 59-60). The goal of the Popular Front was to unite radicals with liberals in the fight against fascism. To this end, communists and others from the left rediscovered folk music as an “authentic” creation of the working-class and a music that could unite anti-fascists around a common cause. As Reuss and Reuss explain, “Now it was emphasized that songs, legends, and other lore offered a realistic reflection of the people’s historical and social experiences and that folk art portrayed the people’s genuine feelings for reality” (60). While this push toward appreciation of folk music and folklore was well underway in the Soviet Union by 1934, communist-sympathizing intellectual musicians and composers in the United States did not fully embrace folk music until “the summer of 1935.” This was “after nearly two years’ agitation by the communists” (Reuss and Reuss 75).

Meanwhile, in the years prior to the Popular Front turn, communist organizers within the U.S. were already realizing the usefulness of folk music for recruiting workers into strike efforts—especially in the rural South. Northern organizers who recruited in the coal and textile industries encountered mostly white workers singing protest song adapted from the Anglo tradition; similarly, organizers who recruited Southern Black workers heard songs derived and adapted from the African-American tradition (Reuss and Reuss 81-98). As the scenario played out most often, northern organizers “ventured out to try to inoculate the rural working-class groups with their own passion for the class struggle”

and in the process “witnessed local sympathizers adapt folk traditions to the cause (Reuss and Reuss 81-2). From this description, we might recall that labor organizers of all political persuasions were migratory in the 1930s, traveling down South or up to the Northeast to organize textile workers, to the Mid-West to pitch in with autoworker strikes, and to the West Coast to assist the longshoremen. They brought with them knowledge of past strikes and carried with them copies of songs for workers to sing. Aside from songs learned from workers in the rural South, these were also sometimes old songs from the IWW movement, and sometimes new songs written during more recent strikes in other parts of the country. Similarly, reporters from the communist and left-leaning press also printed songs from strikes, and in this way aided in their circulation outside of rural circles where they originated. The printing of Odel Corley’s version of “Mademoiselle from Armentières” is emblematic of this larger trend (See Reuss and Reuss 83-6, 89).

In the United States, the communists’ embrace of folk music coincided with a popular folk music revival, which played out in a proliferation of folk music festivals, field recordings of folk musicians, and Works Progress Administration studies of folk music and culture. While it is unclear how widely the “Mademoiselle from Armentières” was circulated as part of this proliferation of folklore culture, this trend is worth mentioning because it coincided with Depression-era labor organizing. In the 1930s, a growing national interest in folk music was championed by an increasingly active “community of folk music enthusiasts that had started to form during the previous decade,” according to Rachel Clare Donaldson in *“I Hear America Singing”: Folk Music and National Identity* (2014) (21). The best known of folklorist and collector of music

during this timeframe was Alan Lomax, who was also known for mentoring and promoting musicians Jelly Roll Morton, Woody Guthrie, Leadbelly, Pete Seeger, and Burl Ives (Reuss and Reuss 124). The rise of interest in folklore is yet another aspect of the larger trend of intellectuals, writers, and artists who focused increasing attention on the plight of the working-class during the 1930s. Further aiding in the circulation of protest songs throughout this period was the proliferation of labor schools, such as the Brookwood Labor School, the Highlander Folk School, and the Southern School for Workers (see Reuss and Reuss 86, 98-103), as well as industrial educational programs led by the Young Women's Christian Association and the Young Men's Christian Association, and the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers in Industry.

Within a larger context, then, we can glean that "Mademoiselle from Armentières" likely circulated through labor activists and the labor press. It may also have been spread through the proliferation of folk culture in the 1930s. But this only tells half the story. Reuss and Reuss write little about the singing and songwriting of unionizing autoworkers—and how songs might have circulated among them—because autoworkers, primarily based in the industrial North, were not recognized as having an indigenous folk culture. According to Reuss and Reuss, in the South, "working-class forms of expression were much more successful than in northern urban centers where traditional singing and folk speech patterns had been obliterated, or nearly so, through the passage of time" (106). As they continue: "Attempts to superimpose the traditions of the rural American heartlands on a city-oriented labor movement therefore at best had only a limited success and a certain artificiality" (107). Of the songs associated with autoworkers, Reuss and Reuss only reprint the lyrics of the widely circulated "Soup

Song,” written by labor attorney Maurice Sugar. Their descriptions of northern union songs likely synthesize an assessment passed down by the purveyors of mid-century folk revival movement, including Lomax, whom Richard Reuss interviewed as part of his research.⁵⁷ As Reuss and Reuss write:

In truth, the most effective agit-prop verse produced in the northern labor movement during these same years [of the 1930s] was cast in an essentially popular vein. Such songs as “Picket on the Picket Line,” “Oh, Mister Sloan,” and “There Was a Rich Man Who Lived in Detoitium” emphasized humor, cleverness, and “cute” lyrics for the most part. They frequently had a jingle-like quality different from the folk-derived union music of the South, which was by comparison unpretentious and straightforward, manifesting a gut militancy absent in the majority of urban labor songs created in the 1930s (107).

However well founded this summation of urban-based labor songs of the Depression, positioning northern labor music as somehow more “pretentious” or less “straightforward” and lacking in a “gut militancy” is perhaps an example of the folk revivalist tendency to consider music with a rural origin—and particularly that tied to a particular, isolated region—to be more authentic than labor parodies derived from popular origin.⁵⁸ It is significant that Reuss’s impressions of northern labor-union music were informed by interviews with Lomax and Seeger, whose efforts toward linking folk music to the political left influenced the way that Americans experienced folk music throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Lomax, through his field recordings, brought Southern “folk” music by both Black and white singers to a wider audience. As both Reuss and Reuss, as well as William G. Roy, in *Reds, Whites, and Blues: Social Movements, Folk Music, and Race in the United States* (2010) have noted, Lomax’s conception of “folk music” as a “style” of singing eventually allowed a separation to form between those who sang folk songs and folk songs themselves. This conception allowed middle-class urban singers, such as Pete Seeger, to become “urban folk

singer[s]” outside of rural, isolated areas where such songs were thought to have originated (Roy 113, 115; Reuss and Reuss 112). Roy characterizes Lomax and Seeger (as well as their fathers, John Lomax and Charles Seeger) as “playing an entrepreneurial role”—albeit one largely outside of high-status positions—in the formation of the American conception of folk music by “cobbling programs, building organizations, recombining various elements into new forms, and using a broad range of social and professional contacts to mold American folk music as not only a style or sound but a musical world that itself bridged institutions” (103). Thus, the conception of folk music that Lomax and Seeger—as well as others in their circle—fostered throughout the twentieth century influenced the way we continue to think about folk music today.

In the case of “Mademoiselle from Armentières,” its unknown origins give the song “folk” credibility, and yet its widespread circulation made it popular far and wide—obscuring its regional associations. It also circulated via commercial means—since the song inspired a British film and was recorded for popular consumption. While the scholarship of Reuss and Reuss is enlightening for highlighting the various ways that labor songs circulated during the Depression, such hard-and-fast distinctions between Southern and northern “folk” music—as well as distinctions between parodies of popular songs and “folk” songs—leaves us with only half the story of how American working-class people used art to protest their working conditions in the 1930s.

This summation not only obscures the use of songs that cross regional, folk, and popular distinctions, it also ignores the fact that throughout the early twentieth century, workers were migratory—and workers brought songs, traditions, and folklore with them as they migrated. In the early part of the 1930s, the country’s roaming population

reportedly included as many as two million boys and young men and roughly 25,000 families. During these years, the nation's railroad cars were laden with illegal passengers, drifting from place to place. Every day, some 1,500 travelers passed through Kansas City alone (Dickson and Allen 60-61). The Dust Bowl disaster was yet another reason for mass migration, as farmers and their families fled the destroyed land of the American Southwest. By one estimate, some 350,000 came to California during the 1933-34 winter season alone, seeking jobs in the emerging business of industrial farming (Denning 260). In the early twentieth century—in addition to attracting sizable numbers of European and Canadian immigrants—the auto industry employed many U.S. Southerners in northern plants. Ford, for instance, employed some 10,000 African Americans—many of whom had Southern roots or had moved from the South during the Great Migration—to work at the River Rouge plant as of 1925 (Babson 42). Sidney Fine, author of *Sit-Down: The General Motors Strike of 1936-1937*, offers a breakdown of the native-born white residents of Flint, as of 1930, noting that “about 12.2 percent (15,818) [had moved] from the states of the South” most of whom “were drawn from the Central South, from Arkansas, Kentucky, Missouri, and Tennessee” (103). As people moved from place to place, they brought along with them their social customs, stories, and songs. Indeed, mapping the evolution of “Mademoiselle from Armentières” to strikes in the north and South suggests more of an overlap between northern and Southern labor songs than is often supposed.

What's more, the material culture of the early UAW movement suggests that singing was an important aspect of fostering solidarity among workers—even in the north. Songbooks and mimeographed song sheets were clearly circulated among workers.

Additionally, journalists who visited northern sit-down strikes in the 1930s found a vibrant singing culture. For instance, United Press newspaper reporter Wiley Maloney, who visited the United Auto Workers historic 1937 strike in Flint, took note of all the singing and wrote an article prophesying that the songs composed in Flint, “probably will be sung by union men and labor organizers for the next generation” (5). His most interesting observation regards how the songs were distributed: “The words and music are passed from man to man, plant to plant, finally reaching the union mimeographs and are passed from town to town,” he writes (5). Such accounts suggest that workers in the northern labor movement may also have sang songs that evoked a “gut militancy” among those who sang them—even if this is difficult to imagine based on reading the lyrics many years later.⁵⁹

Moreover, even two decades after the war, for whatever the reason, the American public remained fascinated by the “Mademoiselle from Armentières” and likely independently continued writing new versions, even as they collected old ones. By the early 1930s, veterans who had been in Europe as 20-year-olds were in their mid-30s, and were presumably the senior laborers in factories. Recall that Cary’s two volumes of “Mademoiselle from Armentières” war versions appeared in the 1930s and were compiled especially for the aging veteran. And, as I will discuss, John Dos Passos referenced the song in his 1932 book *1919*, as he tried to make sense of the events of WWI in his epic fictionalized account. The attachment of WWI veterans to “Mademoiselle from Armentières,” who continued to associate the song with group singing and cooperative composition, kept the song alive in the American labor movement.

The “Mademoiselle” in Flint

The proliferation of the sit-down strike in 1936 and 1937 marked a moment when striking activist workers found themselves with time to come up with a host of new lyrics to old favorite songs—and “Mademoiselle from Armentières” remained one of their favorites. Much was made by Maloney and others of all the songwriting that occurred during the 44-day Flint occupation. Similarly, a newspaper editor for the *United Automobile Worker* remarked that the songs sung by sit-downers were not written for original tunes, but were distinctive even so. In his words, the song parodies “express a collective creative activity that is rare enough in American life” (“Strike Songs: Battle, Victory, Joy” 7). This commentary may be true. However, by the time the song was re-written by Flint autoworkers, working-class Americans had been re-inventing “Mademoiselle from Armentières” for nearly two decades—and rewriting it for the labor movement for some seven years.

In 1937, Flint workers’ chief complaints pertained to the speed of the assembly line, which routinely left workers frazzled and drained at the end of their shifts (Fine 55-57). There were also complaints about the frequent layoffs, as GM introduced new car models each year (Fine 60-61). Even with these grievances, pay at Fisher Body was considered fairly high by industry standards. Sidney Fine, author of *Sit-Down*, an exhaustive historical study of the 1937 Flint strike, found that “average earnings for hourly workers were probably between \$1200 and \$1300 per year,” which was “above the \$1184 average for full-time employees in all industries” (61). Still, Fine added, “it is relevant to note that a Works Progress Administration study estimated that a maintenance level budget for a family of four in Detroit as of March, 1937, was \$1434-79” (61).

Clayton Johnson, who worked as a metal finisher in Fisher No. 2, later recalled his own dissatisfaction with a lack of breaks and general disrespect for the workers among the managers. He also was not satisfied with his compensation: “Well, the pay was low. The working conditions were bad. The speed of the lines was bad,” he said. “I worked within ten feet of a drinking fountain and could not even get a drink of water. I did not have time to do it” (3). The reason the strike ostensibly started in Fisher No. 2 was because two longtime metal finishers, who were promoted to inspectors, refused to quit the fledgling UAW. Their refusal was in spite of company claims the newly appointed inspectors were not entitled to be in the union because they were considered management. When the pair came to work wearing union buttons on December 30, 1936, company guards moved to escort them out of the plant. As Johnson remembered, the union members followed through with prior pledges to support the inspectors: “[W]e all rushed over around the patrolmen with our file backs and blades and things and told them [the guards] that if they laid their hands on these two inspectors, there would be some trouble” (3).

While the collective strike allowed the workers themselves to defy their immediate bosses, their parody of “Mademoiselle from Armentières” titled “Spirit of the Union,” mockingly calls out the names of William S. Knudsen, General Motors executive vice president, and Evan J. Parker, manager of the striking plants. (The Fisher plants were owned by General Motors.) Even as “Spirit of the Union”—as the parody was titled—promoted the workers’ attitude of defiance, it also expressed optimistic pride, as the strikers risked their financial wellbeing in pursuit of better working conditions. The lyrics are as follows:

We Union Men, are out to win, Parlee-voo
We Union Men, are out to win, Parlee-voo
We Union Men, are out to win, and we can take it
on the chin—Hinky, Dinky, Parley-voo.

II

We got old Parker on the run, Parlee-voo
We got old Parker on the run, Parlee-voo
We got old Parker on the run, We hope he trips,
the sun-of-a-gun—Hinky, Dinky, Parley-voo.

III

Knudsen's just another man, Parlee-voo
Knudsen's just another man, Parlee-voo
Knudsen's just another man, who ought to be
kicked in the can—Hinky, Dinky, Parley-voo.

IV

We're for the Union, a Hundred percent, Parlee-voo
We're for the Union, a Hundred percent, Parlee-voo
We're for the Union, a Hundred percent, and
we'll stay right here 'till G. M. Relents,—
Hinky, Dinky, Parlee-voo! ("Spirit of the Union" *FAW* 2; *UAW* 7)

The song was first printed, along with several other songs composed by striking autoworkers, in the *Flint Auto Worker*. It appeared on January 5, 1937, less than a week after the plant occupation began.

While the lyrics may read as simplistic, they serve as a departure from the more usual strike verses of "Mademoiselle from Armentières" sung in the years before the strike. One assumes that the relative originality of these lines came about because the workers, waiting out the days in the plant, had more time to write lyrics than did other strikers on the picket lines (Lynch 86). Today, the idea that hundreds of workers created a space within GM factory walls where they could sing, in unison, that Knudsen was "just another man, who ought to be / kicked in the can," seems nothing short of remarkable. This is the case, in particular, because Knudsen was decidedly not "just another man"

who could be very easily “kicked in the can” or even just another businessman. Rather, he was the powerful leader of the largest car manufacturer in the world, with some 230,000 employees and more than \$1.5 billion in assets (Fine 21). Yet, the nonsensical refrain “Hinky, Dinky, Parlee-voo!” imparts the idea that the singers/lyricists have a devil-may-care attitude toward whatever is referenced in the verse, subverting not only the presumed dignity of the men they mock, but also the very discourse of the civil workplace. By naming Knudsen and others, observes Lynch, “the overwhelming power of the corporation seemed somehow divested” (101).

Despite characterizing the songs the workers wrote as “union propaganda,” Maloney, the United Press reporter who visited the strike, does not dismiss them as uncreative. He writes, “Some of the songs are based upon negro spirituals; others upon old I. W. W. or “Wobby” ditties” (5). He notes that the strikers’ version of “Mademoiselle from Armentières,” “has nearly as many verses as the original,” and reprints two additional verses that he calls “the most popular”:

When a scab dies he goes to hel, [sic] parle-vous.
When a scab dies he goes to hell, parle-vous.
When a scab dies he goes to hell
The rats and skunks all ring the bell,
Hinky dinky parle-vous.

The boss is shaking at the knees, parle-vous,
The boss is shaking at the knees, parle-vous,
The boss is shaking at the knees,
He’s shaking in his B. V. D.’s.
Hinky-dinky parle-vous. (5)⁶⁰

In these verses, as in the Knudsen and Parker verses, the strikers both narrate the actual feelings of the strikers and the events of the strike, even as they mock these events through exaggeration and wishful thinking.

It is perhaps no surprise that the men who occupied the Flint plants also drew dozens of comics illustrating the events of the strike. One of these comics actually bears a close resemblance to an unpublished parody of “Mademoiselle from Armentières,” targeting Judge Edward Black. The judge was found to be a holder of GM stock, even as he issued an injunction that ordered strikers to vacate their factories (Fine 193-95). The Judge Black version of



Figure 1: Cartoon drawing from the 1936-37 Flint sit-down strike. Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs. Used with permission.

“Mademoiselle from Armentières” was written: “There’s another guy called Old Judge Black, who ought to go sit on a tack.” (“Spirit of the Union” n.p.). The cartoon drawn by an anonymous Flint sit-downer shows a business executive in a tuxedo leaping from a chair, on which a huge tack had been placed, and yelling “OUCH!” with the caption: “The sit-down strike hurts the boss” (*The sit-down strike hurts the boss*). Both the song and the comic express the workers’ sentiment toward Judge Black and “the boss” respectively. What they have in common is an exaggerated, slapstick framing of these sentiments. In this sense, cartoon version of the boss flying from the tack is illustrative of the sort of tone that many of the Flint verses of “Mademoiselle from Armentières” evoke. One would easily imagine a cartoon version of a boss “shaking in his B.V.Ds,” or Parker being “on the run,” or Knudsen being “kicked in the can.” In both the cartoons and the songs, the details of the actual figures and events represented have been stripped down to their most basic elements. The sentiments are straightforward and easy to understand. The notions put forth in the

“Mademoiselle from Armentières” parodies were those that all workers participating in the strike could rally around. In this sense, these verses promoted worker solidarity by appealing to their sense of humor aimed toward comical versions of actual events and executives.

Moreover, we can see that the class-consciousness mediated in these versions of “Mademoiselle from Armentières” has changed since the early verses where the blame for difficult circumstances was directed toward the “cops” or simply the “bosses” alone. While the “boss” remains a target, these songs aim higher, toward the likes of real powerbrokers such as Judge Black and Knudsen. In these songs, the workers unite against those who, at least in theory, can make a real difference in their economic circumstances. Also, the “scab” in the Flint version is not the “scab” of Gastonia, who could be bought. The verse, “When a scab dies he goes to hell,” evokes a united front against the actions of scabs—further shoring up the unity of the sit-downers.⁶¹

“Hinky Dinky” vs. the “proletarian grotesque”

In this section, I delve more deeply into how the “Mademoiselle from Armentières” was used to filter and make sense of events as they unfolded in labor-protest situations of the Depression era. To this end, I find Michael Denning’s critique of “social realism”—and his conclusion that the style of “proletarian grotesque” was the consummate artistic style of the 1930s—to be a useful starting point. In this section, I further discuss Denning’s critique, summarize his definition of the “proletarian grotesque,” and finally pose the following question: If the proletarian grotesque is what resulted from leftist artists’ attempts to forge a new cultural front in the Depression, as Denning claims, how does one of the most popular song parodies of the labor movement

of the same time period align with this artistic impulse? This question is especially important because of the intellectual left's expressed interest in plight of the working class during this decade—and the expressed purpose of so many artists to forge a new emancipatory proletarian art. As I conclude in this section, comparing the intellectually forged proletarian grotesque against the popular working-class activist song “Mademoiselle from Armentières” highlights the differences between the activist music that working-class activists selected as a unifying tool and the art that leftist intellectual artists produced in an effort to represent working-class people and promote their interests.

Denning begins by insisting that cultural historians who position “social realism” as the defining artistic style of the cultural front are mistaken. In Denning's view, the idea of social realism, as emblematic of the 1930s, is widely defined on three misguided tenets: 1) its “documentary aesthetic” 2) its “opposition to modernism” and 3) its “relatively straightforward representationalism” (118). The problem is, according to Denning, each of these assumed components of social realism is problematic; cultural critics, he contends, have too-narrowly defined terms such a “documentary,” “modernism,” and “representationalism,” when compared to what these concepts actually meant during the 1930s. As he summarizes this line of reasoning in rather dense language: “[T]he documentary aesthetic was actually a central modernist innovation; the cultural front was *not* characterized by an opposition to modernism; and the crucial aesthetic forms and ideologies of the cultural front were not simple representationalism” (118). Denning provides much more evidence for this assessment of social realism than I can include here. But a large part of his argument rests on the idea that the artistic movements of the 1930s can more readily be characterized as an *extension* of modernism

rather than a *reaction* to it. And his case is compelling. For instance, the widely cited documentary impulse of the 1930s—seen in projects including the Federal Writers Project’s *American Guide* books, the Farm Security Administration photographs, and James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*—can be characterized as modernist projects because of how they fragment and reassemble information; this concept is easily grasped if one considers the affinity between the “‘time-collage,’” of the documentary film and the “spatial collages of modern painting” (Denning 120). As Denning continues, “Moreover, much of the ‘documentary’ work of the cultural front actually involved the experimental incorporation of news genres into art works: one sees this in Dos Passos’s Newsreels, the theatrical Living Newspapers, and in Orson Welles’s parodies of film newsreels and radio news coverage” (120).

Tied into this, Denning provides a compelling analysis of the rise of the documentary during the Depression; he contends that it was brought about by the destruction of what was once considered an immutable cultural order within society. Realist narratives, Denning claims, fell into crisis as a result of the disruption of “knowable communities and settled social relations” (119). The documentary, with its fragmentary collection and reforming of captured “real” material, was what Denning describes as a “particularly modernist solution to this crisis” of an inability to construct realist narratives within an evolving set of social relations (119). In short, he credits the rise of the documentary to “failures of narrative imagination” (120). Although Denning doesn’t use this as an example, James Agee’s exhaustive inventory of items belonging Alabama sharecroppers in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) seems to illustrate just how a documenting impulse can result from a “failure of narrative imagination” wrought

by a changing social order. (I will return to this example later in this section.) Agee, writing about the impossibility of accurately fulfilling his *Fortune Magazine* assignment to describe Southern tenant farmers, falls back upon object inventories as the approach that seems the least exploitative. But even in Agee's painfully self-conscious prose, his object inventories come off not as bits of "reality," but as crafted re-assemblages of fragments pulled from context and collaged. "If I could do it, I'd do no writing at all here," Agee writes by way of introduction. "It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement [...] A piece of the body torn out by the roots might be more to the point" (13).

Denning further claims that the cultural front in the United States can hardly be thought to be a reaction to "modernism" because in the U.S.—as opposed to in Europe—artists of the 1930s barely had an avant-garde movement against which to react. As Denning writes, by the Depression era, "modernism had hardly emerged as an oppositional or avant-garde culture" (121). Instead, as Denning claims, we might see modernism in the United States as best embodied by the growth of modern industry itself. Therefore, the cultural front with its focus on the subaltern, might—in itself—be seen as an avant-garde reaction against "the cultural logic of Fordist capitalism, the soundtrack to the 'roaring' twenties" (121).

In Denning's analysis, the so-called "socialist realism" of the 1930s offered not so much a "realism" through direct representation as much as an exaggerated vision meant to startle an audience—or a surrealism-influenced style he terms the "proletarian

grotesque” (122-3) What Denning actually means by a “proletarian grotesque” is best explained by examples he provides:

The grotesque creates gargoyles that violate accepted classifications, human heads on the bodies of birds. For [Kenneth] Burke, the grotesque way of seeing characterizes both communism and surrealism, both Marx’s account of class consciousness, which grotesquely realigns our categories of allegiance, and the ‘modern linguistic gargoyles’ of Joyce (123).

He goes on to cite a number of examples from the cultural front, from “[t]he twisted figures of Philip Evergood’s *American Tragedy* or *Dance Marathon*” to “the distended vowels of Billie Holiday’s ‘Strange Fruit,’” and from “the gargoyles that open *Citizen Kane*,” to “the gigantic head of Mussolini in Peter Blume’s *Eternal City*” (123).

Denning’s final pronouncement on these proletarian grotesques is that they are ultimately a form of “unstable, transitional modernism.” Like the European-initiated avant garde, the proletarian grotesque is defined by its “attempt to wrench us out of the repose and distance of the ‘aesthetic.’” However, unlike the European avant garde, it lacks “the classical repose of high modernism” (123). The proletarian grotesque, in Denning’s estimation, was also also an aspect of modernism that was doomed because it lacked humor. Denning contends that its “grim refusal of smiles and laughter” made it “unpalatable to the playful mixes of postmodernism” (123).

When looking at parodied popular songs in the labor movement, we might consider that they are also reactions against industrial capitalism, and that these songs also, in a sense, rest upon a documentary impulse that nonetheless fragments and distorts reality. Indeed, their improvised verses might be seen as narrative fragments, capturing the workers’ spirit of opposition during specific moments—often describing these moments *as they occur*. (“The bosses are getting it on the chin” or “The police are having

a helluva time.”) They sometimes refer to specific names of actual people, such as Judge Black or William S. Knudsen, and describe the workers’ collective sentiment toward these individuals. Yet, if these songs are “narrative,” in any sense they tell only bits of stories in ways that help workers make sense of the social imbalances their own actions are causing. Like documentaries, the songs take small bits of material and use these bits to reframe the moments of the strike from a particular pro-worker angle, imbuing these moments with the particular meaning that workers needed to keep up the fight. But unlike experimental films and the catalogues of items belonging to sharecroppers that James Agee listed in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, familiar tunes anchor fragmentary bits of reality into a form that can be shared to shore up a common story. Rather than capturing fragment bits of reality in the face of a situation that defies the creation of a digestible narrative, workers use song lyrics to *stabilize* and *frame* how they conceptualize events within a collective, radical actions. As Lynch notes about the strikers’ songs in Flint, “The songs strikers wrote recounted the strike’s battles, serving as a form of oral tradition for the lore of its epic struggle. The strikers’ determination and the leaders’ courage were retold in the lyrics” (122). In short, the song lyrics solidify the workers’ unified position as heroes and protagonists within their collective narrative.

As we have seen in the Flint parodies of “Mademoiselle from Armentières,” these fragments are not always simply bits of “reality” put forth in a new way. Rather, they are flattened versions of actual people and actual sentiments, exaggerating or oversimplifying certain aspects of situations in order to offer humorous, yet pointed commentary. In this sense, they perhaps share aspects of what Denning describes as a “proletarian grotesque” (122-23). As I have argued, the parodies of “Mademoiselle from

Armentières” have much in common with cartoons drawn by workers—which resemble the proletarian grotesque in this context. Like the cartoons by Flint autoworkers, and like Denning’s examples of the proletarian grotesque, the “Mademoiselle from Armentières” verses cull elements of reality and mix these elements with fantasy and exaggeration.

However, there is one important difference between the proletarian grotesque and the song parodies and worker cartoons: humor. Both the cartoons and the song parodies are far less serious than the examples Denning provides. Rather than “wrench us out of the repose and distance of the ‘aesthetic,’” these worker-created arts are meant to both belittle elements of hegemonic capitalist power and shore up unity through laughter. The static lines and rhyme scheme of the “Mademoiselle from Armentières”—which we might see as its “form,”—were often repeated *because* they made the collective singers laugh. No matter what content is placed in the verse—and no matter how serious or topical this content may be—its seriousness is overturned by the form of the song itself. In other words, the singsong rhyming aspects of the lyrics, and the ridiculous refrain, upset what might be called the documentary aspects of the content. For example, stating the obvious, as in “the police are having a helluva time,” becomes all the more absurd when the kicker is, time and time again, the nonsensical and playful “hinky dinky parlee voo,” and variations thereof.

Adding to the absurdity in the case of “Mademoiselle from Armentières” are all the residual risqué and bawdy lines from the old war song, always at play beneath the surface for the Depression-era striker. In addition to this, “hinky dinky parlez vous” is an inarticulate line. Literally, “parlez vous” in French means “do you speak?” but in this case is probably better translated as nonsensical or even esoteric French *language sounds*,

which is, somewhat ironically, how the words would have come across to Americans who did not speak French. The rhyming “hinky dinky” is yet more illogical nonsense, with underlying sexual mockery. “Dinky,” is, of course, a child-like way of referring to something as “tiny,” (“dinky”), as well as an onomatopoeia for the sound a child’s toy might make. “Hinky dinky” subtly suggests a tiny phallus—as well as a childish or clowning discourse, in direct opposition to the language of the contract, or the language of business negotiation. The last line, in this sense, pushes the song’s contents instead into the realm of silly inarticulation or even fantasy. No matter how serious is the situation being described in the song’s lyrics, the events are at once contained by the last line; “hinky dinky parlez vous” both highlight’s the absurdity of the lyric and serves to protect the singer from suffering at the hands of whomever would take offense.

In this sense, if the proletarian grotesques of the intellectual left, as Denning claims, put forth a social critique with a “grim refusal of smiles and laughter” (123), the Depression-era versions of “Mademoiselle from Armentières” were anti-capitalist critiques meant to unite working-class activists *with* laughter. More generally, when examining other songs that workers sang during the GM strike, Lynch notes that the activists were most drawn to “[u]pbeat and high-spirited tunes”—including “Working on the Railroad” and “Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight.” (103). We might further speculate that, having already experienced the results of Fordism on a daily basis, UAW protesters had little need to ensure that an audience understood the difficulty of their struggle or the seriousness of their purpose. As they were deeply involved in actual conflict with their bosses and the police, workers were in need of material that lightened

their situation and made it more manageable, rather than accentuated the risks they undertook by exaggerating their more menacing qualities.

As we have seen, on several occasions the song made light of serious conflict as it unfolded in the picket line. Ultimately, the one reason why the song worked was because it provided a safe outlet, lightened by humor, for the expression of newly imagined social relations. The form was playful enough to allow workers to experiment with lines such as “Knudsen’s just another man, who ought to be kicked in the can,” without the line being interpreted as a real threat of violence. Instead, it simply de-elevates Knudsen to manageable size, giving confidence to the strikers that they can maintain the upper hand, even as their actions lead them into uncertain territory. In this sense, although “Mademoiselle from Armentières” parodists in the 1930s continued a longtime tradition of re-writing popular songs for the labor movement, the 1930s—as a time of radical thought and deed—propelled such rewriting into action once again. The strikes again made the song useful. These were times that called for reimagining the future. And this was one of the old songs that helped strikers give new form to old social relations.

Riffs on “Hinky Dinky”

For most who sung versions of “Mademoiselle from Armentières” in the early twentieth century, it is safe to assume that the connotations of “Hinky Dinky Parlez Vous” did not matter much beyond being a nonsense line. But revisions of the line in two specific circumstances show that the nonsense line sometimes received more consideration. The first circumstance is literary. In 1932, a version of “Mademoiselle from Armentières” appeared in *1919*, the second book of John Dos Passos’s *U. S. A.* trilogy. The lines are imbedded in an experimental, impressionistic section titled

“Newsreel XXXVI.” (This “Newsreel” is only one of many such sections that Dos Passos intersperses throughout the trilogy.) In “Newsreel XXXVI,” Dos Passos has playfully altered the “hinky dinky” refrain to “Hankypanky parleyvoo” (651-52), at once underlining the song’s loose sexuality and somewhat obscuring the song’s prior childish connotations. The lines Dos Passos chooses feature a “German officer” who “crossed the Rhine.” Later in the song, the officer becomes a perpetrator of sexual violence against the virginal mademoiselle:

*Oh he took her upstairs and into bed
And there he cracked her maidenhead
Hankypanky parleyvoo. (652)*

Scholar John Trombold has written about the popular song lyrics that Dos Passos oftentimes included in both the “Newsreel” chapters of the *U. S. A.* trilogy and in other writing. He points out that the songs are not named and require the contemporary reader to reconstruct “the immediate historical contexts in which they were sung” to understand their textual function (289). Dos Passos himself was an ambulance driver in the war, and he recorded the songs he heard in his diary (290). Trombold surmises that the songs with sexual themes were likely a welcome diversion for rank-and-file soldiers, and that they “rang out different at the front lines than they did at home because at the front such sexually charged songs represented a momentary departure from the business of war” (296).

Another version of the “Mademoiselle from Armentières” that took a dramatic departure from standard strike-song constructions was printed in a 1936 edition of the *New Militant*, the short-lived organ of the Workers Party of the United States. The circumstances under which the song was sung were again an instance of protest

pageantry, but the intended audience was a single government bureaucrat. In this instance, Works Progress Administration workers in Toledo, Ohio had been recently organized by the Lucas County Unemployed League. One night in January, some 800 dissatisfied WPA workers gathered at the city's Memorial Hall, where William B. Schumuhl, the local WPA administrator, was on hand to address the workers' grievances. Their concerns included recent layoffs and cuts in pay. Before Schumuhl took the stage, however, the gathered audience stood and the workers addressed *him*. They held sheets printed with a new version of "Mademoiselle from Armentières" that was, as a reporter wrote, "written for the occasion as a greeting to the administrator" ("WPA Official Gets Told..." 3). Together, some 800 voices addressed him in song:

They promised us fifty-five bucks
a month and said, 'this will do.'
Then they laid us off for half of the
time, and it was cut in two.
They give you hot air and bally-hoo
To warm up your house and make your stew,
And say, 'That's good enough for you.'
We workers are simply all fed up on ballyhoo,
We're tired of all this passing-the-buck and parley-vous
There's plenty here, as we all can see,
We don't have to beg on bended knee.
We'll get what we want, and to hell with you. ("WPA Official Gets Told..." 3)

The song was followed by an hour-long grilling of Schumuhl, after which "the groggy administrator" "beat a hasty exit" ("WPA Official Gets Told..." 3). Whatever we make of Schumuhl's public humiliation, this version of "Mademoiselle from Armentières" represents a sophisticated understanding of the use, history, and connotations of this song. Rather than mentioning the mademoiselle, the workers begin the song by outlining their particular grievances against the WPA's violation of promises. The expression "ballyhoo"—intended to signify "nonsense" explanations given by bureaucratic

officials—in this context, is rhymed with “parley-vous.” “Parley-vous”—in this context—again means “nonsense,” drawing on the fact that the words actually *function* as nonsense in standard versions of “Mademoiselle from Armentières.” In the end of the song, the more standard, “_____ are having a helluva time” lyric has been replaced by the less illustrative and more direct address, “to hell with you.” In this final line, the class-consciousness mediated by the song has been directed, not at more abstract “cops” or “scabs,” but at a specific “you,”—a particular bureaucrat. While the WPA workers did not inflict violence on the Schumuhl, they used their collective singing power to make their demands quite clear. And rather than negate these demands by ending the song with “hinky dinky parlez vous,” they reinforce the seriousness of their grievances by stating they are, “tired of all this passing-the-buck and parley-vous.” In this instance, the protesters have the option of making light of the situation by using the standard ending of the song, but instead, they underscore their frustration and determination to act by negating it.

Woolworths, 1937: “Mademoiselle from Armentières” comes full circle

From Flint the song was adapted by striking store clerks who occupied a Detroit Woolworth’s for six days, beginning February 27, 1937 (Frank 59, 92, 97). I will conclude by describing this version of “Mademoiselle from Armentières” because in many ways it highlights just how much the song had evolved since the war. The 108 young women who occupied Woolworths’s were striking for higher wages, overtime pay, and free laundering of their uniforms, among other demands. They modeled their store occupation after the recent sit-down strikes by auto and meatpacking workers. They

received assistance from the leadership of the cook and restaurant-worker unions that had prepared food for the Flint occupation (Frank 61-2, 79-88).

The most widely known version⁶² of “Mademoiselle from Armentières” by the striking clerks pokes fun of Woolworth’s heiress Barbara Hutton, the socialite worth \$50 million who first inspired the term “poor little rich girl.” Newspapers at the time, regularly reported on Hutton’s lavish spending (Frank 67-9). As Dana Frank, author of “Girl Strikers Occupy Chain Store, Win Big: The Detroit Woolworth’s Strike of 1937” has written, “That year—the year of the Detroit strike—[Hutton] bought jewelry worth \$2 million, a Packard, a yellow convertible, two Rolls-Royces, a 157-foot yacht, and a mansion-estate in London.” (68). Well aware of Hutton’s lifestyle, the store clerks wrote the following lyrics:

Barbara Hutton’s got the dough, *parlez vous*.
We know where she got it, too, *parlez vous*.
We slave at Woolworth’s five-and-dime.
The pay we get is sure a crime.
Hinky dinky parlez-vous. (qtd. in Frank 97, Austin 4, “Life Goes to a Party” 72)

The press coverage that the Woolworth’s strikers received was so extensive that Hutton herself may have read this version of the song. It was written down by a reporter from the United Press who noted that the parody “was [the strikers’] chief song” and that the young women “sang it over and over while curious passers-by pressed their faces against the locked plate-glass doors” (Austin 4). The song parody was also featured in a photographic essay in *Life* titled “Life Goes to a Party.” The *Life* article compares the sit-down strike to a summer camp, calls the Hutton song a “camp song,” and proclaims the Woolworth’s sit-downers the “[y]oungest, prettiest, most prevailingly feminine group of

such recent ‘campers’” (72), by which the author is likely comparing the Woolworth’s strikers to autoworkers and other recent sit-downers.

However condescending the tone of the coverage,⁶³ the strikers themselves demonstrated a mature understanding of class-consciousness in both the actions of their strike and the lyrics of their parody of “Mademoiselle from Armentières.” As Frank has pointed out, the strikers knew the likes of Hutton were living off wealth that had effectively been stolen from workers who were paid a pittance working in Woolworth’s stores. Or, as Frank writes in no-nonsense prose: “She was rich, they were poor. She was rich *because* they were poor” (97). The lines of this version of the song reflect this level of active class-consciousness among the Woolworth’s sit-downers. The strikers also realized that their low pay and long hours were not the fault of their immediate supervisors, but rather, were the product of an organization designed to increase profits for the likes of Hutton. This is especially evident given a statement that a leader among the strikers, Vita Terrall, told reporters covering the strike. In her comments, she discusses attitudes toward her manager, Frank Mayer. As Frank reports:

Terrall told the press after lunch that “they all like[d] Mayer and had ‘nothing against him’”; the real battle, she said, was against the regional Woolworth’s management in Cleveland. Floyd Loew, the organizer, had made the same argument to the strikers during lunch: “Your quarrel is not with the resident manager. . . . Stick by him. The quarrel is with the company” (78).

Given this level of understanding, it is no wonder that the women of the strike wrote their parody of “Mademoiselle from Armentières” mocking Hutton, rather than taking aim at their low-level bosses. Moreover, by attacking the Woolworth’s owner most associated with lavish spending—who was already a favorite media subject—the women savvily wrote a parody that was likely to get picked up by the media. And they were able to

maintain their apparent feminine innocence in the media by ending their mockery of Hutton with the playful, “Hinky Dinky Parlez Vous.” In the end, the tactics deployed by the store clerks worked to their advantage, as the women were victorious in their strike, winning nearly every one of their demands (Frank 97; 110-11).

In the Woolworth’s parody of “Mademoiselle from Armentières,” Barbara Hutton has also replaced the mademoiselle and ranking offers as the mocked figure. By 1937, then, “Mademoiselle from Armentières” had traveled across oceans and state lines, as well as across various industrial, cultural and gender boundaries. The song’s palimpsested lyrical recreations across time and space map an American class-consciousness, as working-class activists repurposed elements of popular and traditional culture in service of their own aspirations. While working-class soldiers in WWI used the song as a distraction from a bloody war, veterans later used it as a political tool on their own behalf, both speaking out against prohibition and arguing in favor of veteran’s bonuses. The song emerged as an anthem of the picket line in the early 1930s, as strikers used the form of the song to describe events as they unfolded. By the latter half of the 1930s, the song’s lyrics were deployed in more creative ways—unifying class solidarity by mocking the lords of industry. By 1937, the song that had once been used to mock working-class French women was taken up by working-class American store clerks to ridicule one of their true exploiters.

CHAPTER 5

“LORD OF THE GOONS”: THE ANTI-MARTIN POETRY WARS

In the late 1930s, one man inspired more poems by unionizing autoworkers than any other: Homer Martin, the United Auto Worker’s first elected president. Less than three years after his 1936 election, Martin was forced to resign in disgrace. Most poems concerning Martin pertain to the factionalism within the UAW during his tenure and express a sense of betrayal and disillusionment with his actions. While Martin was enthusiastically chosen by the rank and file, a majority of union members soon realized they had made a grave mistake by placing their trust in him. The disgust of many autoworkers for Martin’s ineptitude and vindictiveness is apparent in their titles of poems about the union president, such as “Flip-Flop Homer’s Lament,” “My Fascist Plan,” and “To the Lord of the Goons.” These poems take an aggressive and violent tone, even as the poets’ humorous caricatures of Martin would have elicited a smirk from many an anti-Martin reader. Indeed, the poems read as if the poets aimed to outdo each other, each trying to write the most entertaining, most insulting, anti-Martin poem yet.

By the time anti-Martin poems were printed in union-sponsored publications, Martin had already expelled his political enemies from the UAW, routinely Red-baited his adversaries, hired thugs who were reportedly paid to beat up those who opposed him, and attempted to negotiate a secret contract with Henry Ford that would have sold out the union for Martin’s own political gain. He eventually started his own union under the rival American Federation of Labor (AFL), creating a deep factional divide among unionized autoworkers. Martin’s erratic behavior made rich fodder for poets among the rank and file; these men and women found ways to exploit the details from the Martin saga—and

the factional fight the followed—into cleverly worded parodies and larger-than-life poetic tales. While these poems convey a genuine anger at unfolding events, many are also roguishly humorous, frequently framing the events of Martin’s tenure into sarcastic, singsong lyrics.

Today, understanding the anti-Martin poems requires a reader to investigate the events that prompted them. Thus, these poems do not fit Ezra Pound’s definition of literature as “news that STAYS news” (29). Instead, they pertain to what is decidedly news of a certain moment—news that became the stuff of headlines for a few months and then faded from memory. Still, I argue that their of-the-moment quality is precisely what makes the anti-Martin poems so compelling. The purpose of these poems was *not* to transcend their own time; rather, these poets aimed to titillate their contemporaries. That the earliest poems were answered in verse by subsequent poets demonstrates that these poems—so easily overlooked as newspaper filler—actually had a lively readership. Indeed, this was an audience so compelled by what they read that many become active participants in the emerging collective project themselves. Reading these poems also gives us a lens into how working-class, labor activists of the Depression rapidly formed a collective set of tropes around a particular moment. The work of these poets comprises a discursive theater of language performance. And within this poetic forum, autoworkers could—somewhat ironically—build up solidarity among themselves by framing their grievances against Martin within a common discourse.

These poems are important for yet another reason: they grapple with belonging to a union that was increasingly centralized and bureaucratic. While Martin’s inept leadership certainly lead to factionalism and the ultimate breaking apart of the union, it

also opened up a rare opportunity for the rank and file to criticize the overall direction of UAW leadership. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, the UAW's culture as a bureaucratic, professionalized union, intent on working with industry executives to negotiate favorable contracts, was just emerging. So, in one sense, Martin was certainly a rouge leader with a difficult personality who disappointed even his supporters. But in another sense, much of Martin's behavior that so rankled autoworker-poets in the late 1930s, actually foreshadowed actions that later, more politically savvy union leaders, would carry out more completely. For instance, Martin's crackdown on wildcat strikes foreshadowed the UAW leadership's no-strike pledge during World War II. Similarly, Martin's efforts toward rooting out UAW communists in the late 1930s were a mere precursor to UAW President Walter Reuther's purging of communist political foes from the union in 1947. In short, one aspect of the anti-Martin poems' significance is that they can be read as a rare mapping of rank-and-file reaction to the centralization of strong union leadership under the CIO.

A final surprising aspect of these poems is their use of a particular touchstone within popular culture to form a distinctive language. More specifically, as I will discuss, the word "goon" appears frequently in the anti-Martin poems. Indeed, UAW members involved in the factional fight were among the first use the word "goon" to mean a "thug." For many autoworkers of the period, the word also summoned the idea of Alice the Goon, a character in E.G. Segar's popular comic series *Thimble Theatre*, which features the character Popeye. As I will describe, staff of the *Flint Auto Worker*, including the newspaper's editor Ralph Marlatt, consciously promoted use of the word "goon" for describing the strong-arm thugs involved in the UAW's factional fight.

(Marlatt, a UAW poet and former Ford worker, is profiled in Chapter 1.) In this Chapter, I examine the proliferation of the word “goon” within the anti-Martin poems and how the use of this word helped unionizing autoworkers to externalize the emotional toll and fear involved in violent factionalization.

I begin this chapter with an overview of the events that led to Martin’s fitful departure. Next, I closely examine several anti-Martin poems, showing how poets frame their collective disappointment in Martin’s leadership. I then describe the factionalization that followed Martin’s departure and the poems this moment inspired; I draw many fresh details about this factionalization period from Marlatt’s memoir. My study of the word “goon” within the UAW also appears in this section. Finally, I examine poems from the pro-Martin newspaper, the *AFL Auto Worker*. The *AFL Auto Worker* poems are fascinating for two reasons. First, they are poetic answers to the anti-Martin poems from the *Flint Auto Worker* and the *United Automobile Worker*. Secondly, even as these poems take an opposite political stance, their language is similar to that of the anti-Martin poems. As creative works, the pro- and anti-Martin poems have much in common, and give the impression of a shared discourse.

Homer Martin: great orator, lousy leader

Homer Martin was born in August 16, 1902 in a coal-mining region of Illinois, on a family farm not far from Goreville. As a boy, he earned a reputation as an athlete. As a high school student, he was a champion hop, step, and jumper (today, he would be called a triple-jumper), breaking the Illinois state record. He was raised in a poor, religious household, and his pro-union father was an admirer of John Lewis, a name that was practically synonymous with the United Mine Workers of America. Martin grew up in

the midst of local strikes and clashes between miners and mine owners, giving him an early exposure to the culture of labor organizing.

As a young man, Martin worked as a small-time preacher, touring churches in the region where he grew up, putting himself through Ewing College with the money he earned. He later attended William Jewell College in Liberty, Missouri and became the minister at William Jewell Baptist Church in Kansas City. While there—no doubt influenced by his father’s political beliefs—he delivered a pro-proletarian reading of the gospel that prompted disfavor among influential parishioners. Still, even at this early stage, Martin’s passionate preaching style made an impression. F. W. Smith, a church deacon said of him: “Brother Martin was an out and out socialist and preached it in his sermons here. He denounced the rich and the employers who did not pay livable wages. But he was one of the best preachers we ever had here, a sincere Christian man” (“Homer Martin a Militant, Crying Preacher [...]” 12). Martin later recalled that, while working among the poorest parishioners of the William Jewell church, he first experienced a powerful social awakening: “In my social service work there I found men and women living in squalor,” he told a newspaper reporter. “I found such misery that I wept because of it” (“Homer Martin a Militant” 12).

After parting ways with the William Jewell Church, Martin continued preaching his pro-worker sermons as pastor at a Baptist church in Leeds, Missouri. This time, he took aim at businessmen among his parishioners, who he accused of maintaining unfair working conditions. He also participated in labor-organizing activities, including helping to establish an International Ladies’ Garment Workers local (“Homer Martin a Militant” 12). Disapproval among the congregants forced Martin to resign after only two years.

(Associated Press, “Homer Martin, 66, of U.A.W. is Dead” 45). After departing his post, Martin worked on an assembly line at Kansas City Chevrolet, but lost his job once bosses discovered he was unionizing fellow employees (Lichtenstein, *Dangerous* 112, Barnard 58). While he may have been too radical for Baptist churchgoers, Martin’s preaching-style of oratory appealed to the plant’s autoworkers. He was elected vice-president of the Kansas City UAW, and he soon cultivated a strong favorable impression as an adept speaker beyond his home city. He ran for UAW president at the first CIO-UAW convention in South Bend in the spring of 1936. Some 200 delegates elected him unanimously (Barnard 58-9, “Homer Martin a Militant” 6).

Photographs from Martin’s UAW presidency often depict him at a podium, gesturing purposefully, caught up in the pathos of his delivery. Especially adept at recruitment, his speeches made listeners feel called to purpose. Even those who later distrusted him acknowledged his charisma. For instance, although Flint Chevrolet worker Leo Connelly later opposed Martin, years later he remembered the effectiveness of the former preacher’s oratory skill: “To hear him talk ...” said Connelly, “why he just about left you hangin’ on the rafters of the roof when he left.” (n.p.). Away from the podium, Martin gave the impression of a scholar, in part because he wore distinctive round glasses. In 1937, a newspaper reporter described him as having “light brown hair, gray, blue eyes and an almost studious expression” (C.P. 2).

Martin’s delivery of union speeches in the fiery-style of a Baptist preacher especially captivated Protestant autoworkers from the rural South and Appalachia who were familiar with this style of delivery (Lichtenstein, *Dangerous* 112, Barnard 59, 61). As labor historian John Barnard writes, “First in Kansas City and later in automobile

plants and cities scattered throughout the Midwest, Martin's message touched [autoworkers'] hearts and bolstered their faith as he urged them to make their decision, not this time for Jesus but for a new cause, a union in solidarity with their fellow workers" (61). Akron-based rubber-worker organizer B. J. Widick recalled: "He made men feel that in organizing a union they were going forth to battle for righteousness and the word of God." (qtd. in Lichtenstein, *Dangerous* 112). Another demographic that found Martin appealing was the UAW's sizable contingent of white trade unionists from rural, predominately Protestant towns in the Mid-west. These conservative unionists felt their influence threatened by the legions of Jewish, Catholic, African-American, Eastern-European, and white Southern rural poor who were joining the UAW. Their contingent included members of the KKK and other racist, vigilante groups; they had a vested interest in maintaining the status quo, in particular because they considered themselves to be socially aligned with middle-class community leaders who shared their civic organizations and churches. Nervous about losing this societal footing during difficult economic times, they looked to Martin as a conservative leader who would do little to stir up the existing social order. (Lichtenstein, *Dangerous* 112-13).

As president, Martin was adept at tapping into veins of both populism and cultural anxiety and using these forces to attract legions of members to the newly formed UAW (Associated Press, "Homer Martin, 66, of U.A.W. is Dead" 45). Between Martin's recruiting and the excitement of the Flint GM strike (among other factors), union membership grew tremendously during Martin's early presidency. The union included only 71 locals in 1936; by the end of 1937, that number had more than doubled, totaling

209 (Nelson 7). Between the years 1935 and 1939—a period that generally overlays Martin’s presidency—the UAW grew 84 percent (Nelson 9).

Given the demographic contingent that most favored Martin, it is hardly surprising that his track record recruiting African Americans was mixed. On one hand, Martin publically advocated for maintaining the CIO’s non-discrimination policy (Meier & Rudwick 35-6).⁶⁴ Additionally, to step up the recruitment of Black workers, Martin hired several African-American organizational staff members, beginning with Paul Kirk in April of 1937. Seven additional African-American organizers were added to the payroll in the next several months, including four who were full-time (Meier & Rudwick 40-2).⁶⁵ Despite Martin’s steps toward integration, August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, authors of *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW* (1979) point out that the UAW was far more effective at recruiting white workers than Black workers (50). “It is likely that somewhat over half of the blacks in plants covered by contracts had joined the UAW, but white support was far higher,” they write, citing 1937 membership data (50).⁶⁶ The reasons for this discrepancy are various—including racism within the industry,⁶⁷ fears about how contracts might undermine the interests of Black workers,⁶⁸ white union leaders who were “not prepared to stick their necks out” to help black workers fight discrimination, and racism among the rank and file (50-3).

While Martin tried to recruit both Black and white workers to the UAW—and proved especially appealing to white autoworkers of rural origin—he also possessed striking personal and political weaknesses that made him decidedly unpopular among urban radicals, including the UAW’s sizable contingents of communists and socialists. Catholic, Jewish, and nonreligious workers did not have the same positive cultural

associations with his evangelical style as did rural white workers. During his tenure, although he always retained a loyal contingent, Martin increasingly drew criticism for lacking basic managerial skills. His critics claimed he was unpredictable, acting vengefully toward those who dared to front him and wishy-washy on important issues. And at times, he was just plain absent, even walking out on high-pressure meetings (Bernard 61, Lichtenstein, *Dangerous* 112, De Caux 151-53). Perhaps the oddest aspect of Martin's presidency was his close association with Jay Lovestone, a former executive secretary and one of the founding members of the Communist Party of America. Lovestone had been expelled from the party in 1929, after a political dispute with Joseph Stalin. Disillusioned by his experiences, Lovestone soon established the Communist Party Opposition, an anti-Stalinist group based in New York (Dollinger and Dollinger 33, Lichtenstein, *Dangerous* 114). When Lovestone and Martin crossed paths, Lovestone was on a personal mission to purge Communists from influential positions—political or otherwise. Hence, he saw the UAW, with its many leaders who had not-so-secret party affiliations, as a prime target for intervention.

Indeed, the UAW included some 550 Communist members as of 1935—a number that approximately doubled by the end of 1939. Overall, however, party members remained scarce among the union's rank and file. Those who did join the UAW often had organizing experience that was lacking in raw recruits; this experience proved indispensable in Flint and other large-scale actions taken up by the fledgling union (Barnard 119; Lichtenstein, "Communist" 121). Even so, Lovestone—who was later ridiculed in several UAW poems—soon orchestrated Martin's systematic replacement of

Communists and leftists in the UAW with some thirty Lovestone loyalists who, conspicuously, were not autoworkers (Morgan 125, Treaster).⁶⁹

Meanwhile, to increase pressure on the leftists, Martin formed a so-called “Progressive Caucus” in June of 1937 (Lichtenstein, *Dangerous* 113-14). Walter Reuther, then a socialist who was not a member of the caucus, tried to attend a caucus meeting but was not allowed inside (Kraus 319). Hence, Reuther and others began what they called the “Unity Caucus,” comprised of a hodgepodge from the UAW left who felt alienated by Martin. While membership included both Communists and socialists, the majority were less politically engaged union members who generally supported Roosevelt and the New Deal (Barnard 119).

With the two caucuses in place, and Martin’s insistence on purging radical organizers, it is no wonder that the UAW soon erupted into factional fights that regularly made headlines. Kraus recalled Reuther’s descriptions of executive board meetings that “resembl[ed] brawls on a football field” as members of both factions resorted to personal insults and even physical attacks (Kraus 321). One story Kraus heard from Reuther illustrates Martin’s volatility:

[Reuther] described one time when the board was discussing the large number of delegates that Flint was sending to the [1937 Milwaukee] convention (the majority of whom were Unity) and Homer Martin raised the question of economy. Reuther snapped, ‘you’ve got your nerve talking about economy when you’ve been putting dozens of men on the payroll for political purposes.’ Martin rushed at him ‘like a mad bull,’ Reuther said. ‘I ducked and picked him up and threw him over my shoulder. He was kicking his feet and pounding on my back. They had to pull him off.’ (Kraus 320-21)

One issue that seemed to frustrate Martin above all others was the prevalence of wildcat strikes. Indeed, the Flint sit-down strike, which ended in February of 1937, prompted a slew of other spontaneous sit-downs in Flint and other industrial centers.

Automakers that tallied the number of “quickie” strikes in the two years following Flint, claimed that there were some 270 such strikes at GM, 109 at Chrysler, fifty at Hudson and thirty-one at Packard (Barnard 113-114). For Martin, wildcat strikes only hindered ongoing negotiations with GM and other automakers. He blamed Communist leaders within the UAW for fostering the strikes, and their ongoing prevalence became one tool Martin used to accuse left-leaning organizers of stirring up trouble (Kraus 316, Barnard 114).⁷⁰

Complicating matters, GM insisted on the company’s authority to discipline workers who conducted unauthorized strikes; GM executives would not agree to negotiate a new contract until the UAW acknowledged this right. In an effort to move along collective bargaining talks, Martin convinced the UAW’s executive board to pass a measure that recognized GM’s authority to discipline unauthorized strikers. The measure effectively revoked the workers’ only option for quickly dealing with managerial abuses and contract violations. Martin made gestures toward assuring that workers would get quick approval for proposed strikes—a hollow claim smacking of political appeasement (Kraus 350, Barnard 123-25, Lichtenstein, *Dangerous* 118).

In September of 1937, a dramatic series of events unfolded that brought to light the growing conflict within the union—and later supplied fodder for many anti-Martin poems. It all began when Martin made an announcement from Detroit’s Eddystone Hotel, where he maintained a private office: a large number of the union’s paid employees would be dismissed.⁷¹ Based on the political loyalties of those let go, Kraus was skeptical of Martin’s assertion that the cuts were due to budget constraints: “[T]he first ten victims he named were Unity people” (349). Kraus read in the *Detroit News* that he, himself, was

among those “no longer on the payroll” for his job as editor of the *Flint Auto Worker*. He never found out who let him go (349).

On September 29, some forty autoworkers, angry about the purge and the stalled contract with General Motors, gathered at the Eddystone demanding to see Martin (Associated Press, “Martin Points Gun at UAW Men...” 4). Encountering the crowd as he passed through the hotel, Martin was cordial, assuring his visitors he would meet with them soon (Kraus 349). However, hours later, Martin still had not appeared. Five representatives went to his room and, according to the Associated Press, “pounded and kicked against the door” (Associated Press, “Martin Pokes Gun at Men” 1, Martin Points Gun at UAW Men 4). Martin then “opened [the door] a few inches and stuck a gun out through the aperture” (Kraus 349). Later on, Martin, accompanied by Reuther, agreed to speak with the crowd in the auditorium of the UAW’s headquarters, but instead disappeared into an elevator and then fled in a taxi (Associated Press, “Martin Points Gun at UAW Men... 4).

Markedly, the gun incident at Eddystone inspired what may be the earliest anti-Martin poem. In the next section I will discuss the Martin poems—mostly published after January of 1939—more extensively. But I mention this poem (and one other further down) in my chronology because it was written during a time when Martin’s censorship prevented its publication. The poem only survives today because it ended up among Henry Kraus’s papers at the Walter P. Reuther in Detroit.

Titled “Martin’s Last Stand,” this poem is comprised of six, four-line stanzas of mock-heroic verse comparing Martin’s gun-flashing episode at the Eddystone Hotel to the “last stand” of George A. Custer. While no author is listed, the file is dated October

18, 1937, less than a month after the episode occurred. By October, Kraus was no longer editor of the *Flint Auto Worker*, so it is unlikely that he attained this poem as a newspaper submission. Since the poem was filed among various materials related to union factionalism, it was probably circulated among Unity acquaintances. Given Kraus's circle, it could have been written by an organizer, rather than a member of the rank and file. Still, I mention this poem because it represents an early example of how anti-Martin poetry was written to recast violent factionalism into lighthearted verse. For instance, the third and fourth stanza read:

No doubt you've heard about the raid
At the Hotel Eddystone
Where Homer Martin, gun in hand,
His yellow streak made known!

White with rage, he waved the rod
He shivered and shook with fright.
He called for "Reuther" instead of "God"
To deliver him from his plight. (n.p.)

Here, the gun-wielding Martin is made into an anxious, cartoon-like figure who "shivered and shook with fright" while he "waved" his somewhat phallic "rod," calling out for Walter Reuther to talk down the angry workers (n.p.).

Another unpublished poem was written some nine months later, in regard to another of Martin's antics. In addition to ridding the union of Unity staffers, Martin also wanted to get rid of his opponents on the executive board. He found an opportunity when the board got into a squabble over whether to extend a meeting agenda to discuss finances and other matters. When the board voted to extend the agenda, against Martin's wishes, Martin stormed out of the meeting with his supporters. Martin later announced the suspension of four vice-presidents: Wyndham Mortimer, Ed Hall, Richard

Frankenstein, and Walter Wells. He also suspended George Addes, who was secretary treasurer (Lorence 184, Kraus 374-77; Morgan 127),

This incident inspired a parody of “Yankee Doodle”—in which Martin informs board members that they have been banished from the UAW’s headquarters:

Mr. Martin
Came a-dartin’
From his private suite
And says “Dear Brothers[”]
To Dick & others
In speech so short & sweet
“Go my friends
And show no more
Your faces around here
This with Lovestone’s compliments
Who guides me far & near.”

“I’m sorry I have to act like this
But orders is orders. I tell you.
So pack your bags
And let my thugs
Escort you out of here.[”] (“Mr. Martin” n.p.)

As in “Martin’s Last Stand,” this parody uses a mock-heroic tone to poke fun of Martin. Rather than acting as an admirable leader in this poem, Martin “came a dartin’ / from his private suite,” a rather comical action for a leader, especially when contrasted with the apparent fanciness of his accommodations. The Martin poem makes reference to Martin’s oratory skill in mentioning his “speech so short and sweet” and specifically references his reliance on Lovestone to make important decisions.

Also, like “Martin’s Last Stand,” this poem was found among Kraus’s papers. The original is written in pencil, on paper torn from a writing pad, creating the impression that it was either written by Kraus himself or passed to him informally, perhaps by a fellow UAW organizer. Given the per-chance survival of this poem and

“Martin’s Last Stand,” among Kraus’s papers, it seems likely that members of the Unity Caucus wrote and circulated poems regarding Martin long before such poems could be published in UAW publications. Writing such poems was perhaps a means of relieving the tension of being involved in a factional fight and building up camaraderie among anti-Martian forces who were otherwise ideologically divided.

When Martin suspended the board members, little did he know that his own days as UAW president were numbered. The board members who Martin expelled were forced to endure a “trial” staged by the remaining executive board (Kraus 376-7, Barnard 134). Even Lovestone, at this point, found Martin’s action ill considered. “I was against the suspensions,” he wrote to Louis Stark of *The New York Times*, “not because I think they didn’t deserve it, but because I didn’t have enough confidence in the energy and vigor of the suspenders” (qtd. in Morgan 128). The upshot of the subsequent “trials” was that the defense presented a cache of letters between Martin and Lovestone, bringing to light the extent of Lovestone’s involvement with Martin’s daily affairs. (Lovestone’s biographer notes that the letters were likely obtained by Communist Party-backed burglars, who broke into Lovestone’s apartment [Morgan 129-30].)⁷² The letters had the impact of a bombshell that affected the subsequent round of UAW elections, allowing the Unity Caucus to elect enough representatives to gain a foothold over the Progressive Caucus (Barnard 135, Dollinger and Dollinger 48). Ultimately the board upheld Martin’s decision to expel Addes, Mortimer, Hall, as well as Frankenstein. Wells received a three-month suspension. However, in September, John Lewis sent the CIO’s Philip Murray and Sidney Hillman to Detroit to work out a new deal. Murray and Hillman convinced Martin to recant on the expulsions in exchange for Martin’s remaining in the good graces of the

CIO. Also, as a result of this arrangement, several Lovestoneites were fired from the UAW's staff. (Morgan 130, Barnard 135-36, Dollinger and Dollinger 49, Kraus 396, Lorence 226).

However, this deal did not end the drama. Martin's desperation to regain power came to a head on January 20, 1939 when the embattled president upped the ante by sanctioning fifteen of twenty-four UAW board members on charges of conspiracy. He brought his case to Wayne County's circuit court, charging, among other complaints, that the board members had sabotaged his ongoing negotiations with Ford. Martin claimed that he was finalizing an agreement with Ford in which Ford would have granted workers collective bargaining rights and provided employment for roughly six hundred former Ford employees who were out of work. The board members, he claimed, halted these negotiations by trying to turn over key documents and materials to the CIO (Kraus 396, Dollinger and Dollinger 50).

Rather than depart quietly, the suspended board members regrouped with the approval of the CIO, impeached Martin, and established *themselves* as the legitimate leaders of the UAW. They appointed Vice-President R. J. Thomas—a former Martin holdout who had recently broken ranks and had the support of the CIO's leadership—as their new acting president. They scheduled an internal trial for Martin. However, Martin refused to accept his impeachment; he and his supporters physically occupied the UAW headquarters at the Griswold Building in Detroit. A reporter noted that “Guards armed with short clubs were in evidence at the offices,” (Associated Press, “Ousted Leaders of Auto Union Claim Aid of CIO” 1).

During Martin's UAW "trial," which Martin did not attend, further details surfaced about Martin's private negotiations with Ford (Kraus 399, Dollinger and Dollinger 49-50). It emerged that Martin met specifically with Harry Bennett, the infamous henchman who led Ford's so-called "Service Department." Bennett proposed that Ford would grant the UAW recognition if the UAW would agree to give up its affiliation with the CIO and organize either independently or under the more conservative AFL (Kraus 399-400). To many of the rank and file, such an offer must have seemed unfathomable, given that the UAW had only recently fought hard to escape the yoke of the AFL, an old-fashioned craft-based union that supported trade workers such as carpenters, machinists, and stonecutters. (For more on this history, see Chapter 1.)

The details of the negotiations between Ford and Bennett would raise the suspicion of any autoworker familiar with Ford's history of violence toward unionization efforts. According to Kraus, "Bennett offered to put thirty thousand Rouge workers into a meeting for Martin to organize; he also would place his entire Service Department at Martin's disposal at any time or place required" (400). This vision of an autoworkers' union that Bennett used to tempt Martin had all the markings of a company union under Ford's control.⁷³ To Martin's opponents the former president's motivations were clearly to sell out the UAW to Ford in order to gain power and prestige for himself alone.

After his ouster from the UAW, Martin started his own version of the auto union under the AFL, but he only managed to bring along a handful of locals. The anti-Martin group called Martin's new organization a "rump" union and denounced Martin for dividing autoworker loyalties. Martin held his own rival UAW convention in Detroit on March 4. The UAW-CIO's executive board—without Martin—but with the CIO's

backing, had a separate convention on March 27 in Cleveland. Reports on the number of delegates at the Martin convention vary from 400 to some 650 (Morgan 131, Kraus 404). In any case, these pro-Martin delegates represented some 60,000 members—only about a fifth of the UAW’s prior total membership (Morgan 131).

Striving toward an American unionism

With Martin’s departure, the tone of the *United Automobile Worker* took a decided turn; suddenly, most of the articles, letters, and editorial cartoons that appeared in the newspaper were devoted to both ridiculing Martin and making sense of recent events. The first anti-Martin poem to appear in the UAW newspaper was, “What is American Unionism?” published on March 4, 1939. It was written by E. Buck Jones who belonged to Dodge Local 3 of the Hamtramck section of Detroit. It is worth discussion here, not only because it was first—and likely inspired later poems—but also because Jones addresses important questions concerning how a large, centralized American union should operate. While Jones’s basic premise is to highlight the difference between American ideals of democracy and Martin’s dictatorial style of leadership, the poem gestures toward larger issues concerning the collective identity of workers who share a “common cause.” It reads as follows:

American Unionism, we will agree,
Belongs to any working person—to you and me.
We must be banded together in the common cause.
All of us are American according to our laws.

We are many nationalities, colors and creeds,
But we won’t swallow the stuff Homer Martin feeds.
Martin has it in his head we are all fools—
But you can’t call it American when one man rules.

As for progressive, we all know
We’re four million strong in the CIO.

So let's all stick together and don't fear—
We ARE Americans with union atmosphere. (4)

The idea that American unionism belongs to every working person, on its face, seems self-evident and easy to embrace. But it becomes more complicated when we consider, as does Jones, the actual diversity of workers in American industry—including all of their “nationalities, colors, and creeds.” Jones, indeed, calls for a radical form of inclusiveness as he appeals to patriotic sentiment by emphasizing democracy as a core American value, stating that “you can't call it American when one man rules” (4). By urging union members to “stick together and don't fear” he implies that workers should not be fooled by Red baiting, which Martin had used to exploit “fear” among union members. Unity—with democracy—that allows for diversity of both ideologies and cultural identities—becomes the very definition of “American Unionism” in this poem.

Another early anti-Martin poem, from about a week later, makes for an apt comparison to “What Is American Unionism?” “Clear the Road,” was submitted by an anonymous member of Cleveland's Local 297. In it, the poet explicitly calls out Martin for holding up the progress of the union. In comparison to the Jones poem, its language and meter are forceful rather than cajoling. While the Jones poem retains some semblance of civility by focusing on the unity of union members, the title “Clear the Road” blares with imperative. The poem reads:

Some guy's holding up the line,
Demagog [sic] with voice so fine,
Blocking Labor in its move along—
Sings a lousy boss's song,
Not the Homer of long ago
But one that Henry has in tow.

Champion of the doublecross,
Company union—“ME” as boss;

Goons and stooges are his pals
He shuns the men in overalls.
Spends our money left and right
On a phony faction fight.

But the time is drawing near
When we'll set him on his ear,
Toss him into Bennett's gang,
Let them have him and go hang;
Peace in Auto then will be—
Move along! The line is free. (4)

Like the contemplative “What is American Unionism?” this poem takes issue with Martin’s centralized leadership. But rather than denounce Martin for failing to protect democratic ideals, this poet criticizes Martin for selling out working-class union members in his quest for personal achievement and power. In a tone both masculine and tough, the poem’s opening aptly compares Martin’s tyrannical mischief to a worker holding up the advance of an assembly line, an especially apt metaphor for readers with first-hand experience of a less-efficient worker preventing the progress of the group. It is worth noting that it is the workers—not the bosses—who are annoyed by a lack of progress on this particular assembly line, and that it is Martin who holds back progress by making allegiances with the bosses, such as Henry Ford.

With the lines, “Goons and stooges are his pals / He shuns the men in overalls,” the speaker emphasizes clothing as something that separates Martin from rank-and-file union members. Indeed, Martin was regularly pictured in national newspapers wearing stylish suits. The poet contrasts this clothing with that of the rank and file, who wore work clothes, such as overalls. Indeed, overalls were more than simply a practical garment for laborers in the 1930s. As Sandra Curtis Comstock notes in her history of blue jeans, beginning in the early years of the Depression, overalls and jeans became a

powerful signifier of working-class identity throughout American culture. As she points out, they were worn by the workers in Diego Rivera's *Detroit Industry* murals, as well as by Charlie Chaplin, in his comic take on assembly line work, *Modern Times*, released in 1936. According to Comstock, "No image was more repetitively documented or invoked than that of working people in their overalls and straight-leg blue jeans" (36). In this poem, then, the poet uses this image of men in overalls to evoke class solidarity—and by extension to imply that when Martin "shuns the men in overalls," and "spends our money left and right," betrays class unity to foster his own sycophantic relationship with company bosses.

Both "What Is American Unionism?" and "Clear the Road," deal with the idea of Homer Martin as a strong leader of a centralized union. When looking at both of these poems, it is important to remember that, unlike leaders of smaller unions, Martin was a nationally known figure who garnered national headlines. In this respect, he—along with well-known industrial union leaders John Lewis, Sidney Hillman, and David Dubinsky—could be seen as occupying a position that was about to become increasingly important in the emergent structure of organized labor of the twentieth century: that of the central leader of a sprawling, diversified international.

Both of the above poems share an underlying hope that the UAW's troubles will end once Martin is expelled from the union. While "Clear the Road" offers the hope of "peace" within the union after Martin's departure, "What is American Unionism?" offers a vision of a union—with its many "nationalities, colors and creeds"—united in solidarity. Other poems articulate even more specific convictions concerning the union's new direction following Martin's departure. Two poems, in particular, voice the

conviction that Martin's departure will result in more worker-initiated actions winning the approval of union hierarchy. "Ode to Labor," by M.L. Weitherford, of Local 371, expresses such faith in John Lewis:

John L. Lewis knows what it's all about,
He is a good labor leader that won't sell us out.
We have labor in the country, we have labor in town,
If we follow John Lewis he will never let us down.
If we have a strike under CIO,
The factory stays down till we say so. (7)

Lee Smith, of Local 265, in Evansville, Indiana, expresses similar faith in R.J. Thomas, the new UAW president elected by the UAW, after being vetted by the CIO's leadership.

In his poem "The Spirit of Union Men," appear the following stanzas:

Confidence in our leadership.
That has proven to be right.
Confidence in our fellow worker,
The first example, BRIGGS STRIKE.

Instead of publishing to the world
That we had an outlaw strike,
Thomas said, You're right boys,
Let's all get in and fight!

If we had a dues and membership drive
Homer said, we were wrong.
But now Thomas is our president
And he sings a militant song.

Both of these poems express hope that union leadership—without Martin—will support the wishes of rank and filers out on strike. In reality, however, striking workers could not depend on union leadership—with or without Martin—for this level of support. Lewis, for one, was aware of how wildcat strikes could undermine contracts and negotiations—and would not necessarily support workers continuing a strike "till [they] say so." For example, in 1937, roughly 2,500 workers staged a wildcat sit-down at Pontiac's Fisher

Body Plant. Their action was to protest the layoff of 1,350 workers and scaled back hours for the remaining employees. When this strike was settled, the company fired the strike leaders. To protest the firings, some 500 workers returned to occupy the plant. Rather than support these strikers, Lewis was among those union officials who urged Martin to end the strike by not granting it official UAW support. In the end, the strikers lost, representing a monumental setback for not only the local but also the union's standing in ongoing negotiations with GM (Lichtenstein, *Dangerous* 119-123). This is, of course, only one example of many in which Lewis was more interested in gaining a contract than in supporting workers out on strike. Similarly, the notion presented in "The Sprit of Union Men," that UAW President R. J. Thomas "sings a militant song" by supporting worker-initiated strikes would soon prove to be wishful thinking. Thomas became an outspoken advocate of upholding the CIO's no-strike pledge during World War II, even as wildcat strikes continued throughout the war years (Barnard 189-191). Similarly, hopes for a union that could conceivably people of all "creeds" or find "peace" proved quite challenging in the years ahead. The centralization and professionalization of the UWA doubtless allowed the union to gain power as a purposeful, large-scale, industrial union in the mid-twentieth century. But to achieve this unified strength and achieve "peace" within the union, leadership sacrificed radical activists and thinking. Indeed, by the late 1940s—when the union finally did end factionalization—the UAW had only one caucus left—that in support of Walter Reuther (Barnard 250).

The optimism that a more broadly egalitarian union is possible is one aspect of these poems that makes them distinctive and emblematic of their moment. As Nelson Lichtenstein observes in his now classic essay, "Industrial Democracy, Contract

Unionism, And the National War Labor Board,” the latter half of the Depression was a time when it still remained unclear how emerging unions would represent the interests of constituents. Toward the end of the Great Depression, “collective bargaining was but one of several elements that defined the relationship between workers and their employers” (525). Other means of settling the grievances of employees included: “shop-floor assemblies, slowdowns, and stoppages” which “proliferated after the sit-down strikes of 1936 and 1937” (525). In Lichtenstein’s summation, the ability to participate in this range of direct actions on the shop floor prompted a growing enthusiasm for unionization in the Depression. As he writes, “Direct shop-floor activity legitimized the union’s presence for thousands of previously hesitant workers who now poured into union ranks” (525). While such direct action no doubt inspired unionization among workers, Lichtenstein’s characterization perhaps overlooks the advantages to workers of laboring under a signed contract with legal backing.

Indeed, his version of events has certainly inspired criticism from fellow labor historians, including, most notably David Brody, who argues that shop-floor workers’ battles for stabilizing contracts well predate the formation of the CIO; Brody’s prevailing point is that demands for contracts originated *within the rank and file*, and that contracts provided protections for unionists who were otherwise desperately vulnerable to the whims of business executives. The reasons why workers wanted contracts, in Brody’s summation, are commonsensical: they wanted job security, seniority protections, fair pay for workers in similar jobs, and a codified system for handling workplace grievances (179-181).

Brody's explanation is perhaps the logical rejoinder to Lichtenstein's utopian vision of shop-floor direct action. However, given hindsight, it is difficult to deny David Montgomery's summation in 1979, some 35 years ago, that union members both gained and lost something as part of the equation, when union leaders in the 1940s aligned with a Democratic Party that routinely put business interests before those of workers and left contract negotiations as the only viable means for workers to assert their interests. With the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947, and systematic court injunctions against striking workers, labor-activist actions beyond the scope of contract negotiations became increasingly illegal. As Montgomery observes, "Both actions of class solidarity and rank-and-file activity outside of the contractual framework were placed beyond the pale of the law. Since 1947 successive court rulings (especially those of the 1970s) have progressively tightened the legal noose around those historic forms of working-class struggle which do not fit within the certified contractual framework" ("American Workers and the New Deal Formula" 166-7). By the late 1940s, actions such as expelling radicals, repressing wildcat strikes, and forming more collaborative relationships with business executives in the interest of contract negotiations grew to be established practices for the leadership of American labor unions (Montgomery, "American Workers and the New Deal Formula," especially 165-67 and 169). Thus, Martin may have been an eccentric leader; however, in the sense that Martin repressed wildcat strikes, expelled radicals, and did not feel he needed the support of the rank and file when negotiating with the likes of Henry Ford, Martin perhaps shares more elements of the emergent style of national union leadership than UAW members knew—especially when we consider

Reuther's eventual bureaucratization of conflict management and his successful effort to rid the UAW of radical elements.

Goonland

If many of the anti-Martin poems idealize the future, so too do they deal with their immediate present. And for many UAW members of the 1930s, being in an auto union meant dealing with thugs—be they “flying squadrons” of fighting men from either side of the faction fight, or Martin’s henchmen, hired specifically to intimidate his opponents. It is hardly surprising then, that the word “goon” makes frequent appearances in the anti-Martin poems. Of the twenty-three published anti-Martin poems I have found, six—or more than a quarter—make direct reference to Martin’s goons. For instance, I have already discussed “Clear the Road,” in which “Goons and stooges are [Martin’s] pals” (4). Another example is “My Fascist Plan,” by an anonymous “Dodge Local Member.” The poem is written in rhyming couplets, and uses the voice of “Martin” in the first person. In the poem, the “Martin” voice describes his own brand of dictatorship, which resembles that of the Nazis’ who were, by 1939, expanding their reign of terror across Europe. As such, in this poem, the goons take on the form of brownshirt-like figures, enforcing their leader’s will with violent tactics. Interestingly, in the poem, the speaker (as Martin) brags that he oversees meetings “on a Fascist parliamentary plan,” implying a corrupted, strong-arm “democracy,” forced to align with Martin’s will. A section of the poem reads:

I model after Hitler, for we see eye to eye,
And dare you try to oust me, you’ll see the reason why.

I’ll set my goons upon you, if you try to state your case,
Ten of them, with baseball bats, will put you in your place.

I run our regular meetings on a Fascist parliamentary plan,
That to the world's amazing—get a hearing if you can.

I'll stand up there before you, say the moon is made of cheese,
And if you dare deny it, goons beat you to your knees. (Dodge Local Member 7)

More goons are referenced in the poem “To the Lord of the Goons,” written by the Auto-Lite Committee of Toledo's Local 12. This poem, also written in the voice of Martin, includes the lines:

With so many checks in circulation
You need not stretch your imagination
Or guess who backs these slimy notes
To hire goons to cut your throats. (Auto-Lite Committee of Local 12 7)

The implication in this poem is that Ford, and possibly other automakers, were paying off Martin (“back[ing] these slimy notes”) to undermine the interests of the autoworkers. Also, the poem implies that the money Martin received from automakers allowed him to “hire goons” to carry out his personal bidding. What's interesting is that “To the Lord of the Goons” was published on March 19, 1939, several months before more official channels reported allegations that Martin did indeed receive money from Ford and used it to hire men to beat up opponents.

Confirmation of the poem's assertion, indeed, came following Martin's departure, when the National Labor Relations Board began investigating the UAW-CIO's claims that Martin colluded with Ford. During this investigation, Harry Elder, Martin's former bodyguard, submitted a damning affidavit to the labor board on September 2, 1939 (“Rump Goon Gives Facts” 1). In the affidavit, Elder stated that he saw Ford agent John Gillespie gave Martin a “pack of bills.” “The bills were unfolded, flat, and were about two inches high,” Elder wrote in the sworn statement, reprinted in the *United Automobile Worker*: “They were in packages with paper strips around them such as are used by

banks. Those that I saw were of \$20 denominations” (“Ford Payments to Rump Leader Revealed” 6). Martin had told Elder that he (Martin) had planned to resign from his UAW presidency earlier than he did, but stayed on at the urging of Bennett and Ford. Elder wrote that Bennett was in the same room during this conversation and “said nothing” as Martin spoke. According to Elder, “[Martin] said that [Ford and Bennett] had asked him not to resign, stating they knew they had to deal with some union and they would prefer to deal with him” (“Ford Payments to Rump Leader Revealed” 6). Further, financial assistance from Ford was what allowed Martin to continue on as the union’s president. (“Ford Payments to Rump Leader Revealed” 6).

Elder also testified that Martin paid him \$250 to hire “some boys” and to “get some guns” and beat up Martin’s political opponents including Walter Reuther. According to the testimony, the order was “that he did not want these men killed, just put in the hospital, break a couple of arms, etc.” (“Ford Payments to Rump Leader Revealed” 6). While Reuther was threatened by mysterious men during the Martin presidency, it not clear on whose behalf these threats were conducted.⁷⁴

Given Martin’s use of goons, and their prominence in autoworker poetry of the era, some discussion of the term’s history is pertinent here. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word “goon” itself emerged in the early 1920s. The word might well be a derivative of “goony” which means “a simpleton.” “Gooney” is of unknown origin, and dates back to the sixteenth century. But “goon” meaning, “A stolid, dull, or stupid person” (“goon, n.”) dates to only about 1921, when it was possibly first used among American college students. In a usage examples, the *OED* quotes a letter from an editor of *Life Magazine*, printed in November of 1938, explaining the origin of the recent

use of “goon” within unions: “Labor union lingo has given it a second meaning: a tough or thug. Rival unions and factions speak of another’s ‘Goon Squads.’” (qtd. in “goon, n.”). Thus, this more recent definition of a goon as a, “a hired thug” originated in the American labor movement in the late 1930s. The earliest reference to the “hired thug” meaning listed in the *OED* is 1938—only the year before most of the anti-Martin poems were written. So poets who used the word “goon” were tapping into the most recent developments in labor-movement slang, and helping to shape the word’s emerging connotations.

Workers of the period also had a very specific image from popular culture in mind when they thought of a goon. In 1933, before the labor movement adopted the word, a comic strip character, who would soon be named “Alice the Goon” appeared in E.C. Segar’s comic strip *Thimble Theatre*.⁷⁵ *Thimble Theatre* is the series best known for introducing Americans to Popeye, Bluto, and Olive Oyl—and it was wildly popular in the 1930s. In her earliest appearances, Alice is the ungainly minion of the Sea Hag character. Compared to human characters, such as Popeye, Alice the Goon is gigantic; while she is bald, she sports long hair around her ankles, calves and torso, and has a prominent nose (Segar 11). Her appearance reportedly frightened children into having nightmares, and



Figure 2: Alice the Goon cartoon from 1933. Reprint in *E.C. Segar's Popeye. Plunder Island* and published by Fantagraphics, 2009. Used with permission.

Segar soon made Alice into a friendlier-looking character who Popeye and Olive trusted enough to babysit little Sweet Pea (Grandinetti 185). More generic goons appeared in a 1938 animated Popeye short titled “Goonland,” shown in movie theaters. In the “Goonland” sequence, an island of goons holds Popeye’s “Pappy” captive, and Popeye comes to rescue him. (“Goonland”).

Drawn pictures of comic pro-Martin goons resembling Alice the Goon and the goons of “Goodland” also appear in the UAW press. In 1939, the *Flint Auto Worker*, featured several sketches of a “Goon” resembling Alice lobbying for Martin. That this goon is clearly copied from Segar’s creation was no accident, rather the *Auto Worker* goons served to give workers subjected to violence a way to think about—and minimize their fear of—their tormentors. The word “goon” was, in this sense, something useful; throughout this timeframe, members of both autoworker factions perpetrated violence against one another. As former Fisher Body Division employee Bruce Malott later recalled of the

factional fight in Flint, “That was a bloody mess.” Simply being on the street in Flint wearing the wrong button could be dangerous. According to Malott, “One night the AF of L would be out in numbers. And if you had a CIO button on, you got the hell knocked out of you. You either took the button off or they whipped you. And as a result of that, the

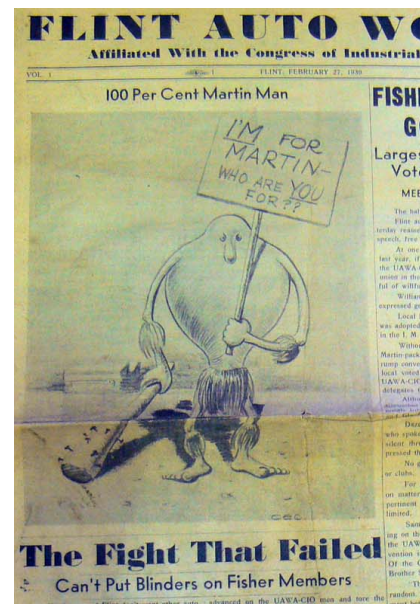


Figure 3: Goon cartoon drawing from the *Flint Auto Worker*, February 27, 1939. Bud and Hazel Simons Collection. Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs. Used with permission.

CIO would be out in force the next night. And if you had an A F of L button on, you got it” (n.p.).

Ralph Marlatt, as editor of the *Flint Auto Worker*, later recalled in his unpublished memoir, specific incidents in the rough-and-tumble fight between union factions in which “goons” from the Martin side made a violent impression on UAW-CIO members. One in particular occurred when Marlatt and other UAW-CIO unionists converged at the Fisher 1 plant to hand out the first issue of the *Flint Auto Worker* that Marlatt had edited (94).

The location was no doubt strategic; at the time, Fisher 1 workers were split between the Martin and CIO camps (92). As Marlatt recalled:

No sooner were our people in place and the papers stacked on the sidewalk for distribution than the Martin Flying Squad came streaming out of the [UAW-AFL] hall armed with butt ends of pool cues. They rushed across the street and in an instant there was complete bedlam. Most of our people were unarmed, purposely so that we could not be accused of having come to the plant for the purpose of starting a riot. Within a few minutes several of our distributors were lying unconscious on the ground. There was fighting all around us and the CIO people were scattered and fighting to get away. I saw many of them running with blood streaming down their faces, some of them dazed, being dragged into cars and driven away to hospitals or back to the hotel for treatment. Our papers were seized and tossed on a huge bonfire in the middle of the street. (64)

Police who stood nearby did nothing as the violence unfolded (64). Surprisingly, Marlatt managed to escape unharmed.

The newspaper staff and union volunteers returned to Fisher 1 a week later with the next issue of the newspaper; this issue, published February 27, 1939, features a front-page cartoon of a Martin supporter modeled after Alice the Goon. The title of the cartoon reads, “100 Per Cent Martin Man.” In one hand the goon holds a spiked club. In the other hand, the goon holds a sign that reads, “I’M FOR MARTIN-WHO ARE YOU FOR??” To make light of the burning of the prior week’s edition, the newspaper staff arranged for

a single copy of the issue featuring the goon to be literally printed on asbestos. As Marlatt recalled, the asbestos issue “caused a lot of laughter and banter as Fisher workers streamed out of the plant to take the paper and join in the fun” (96). A notice inside the paper informed readers that the asbestos issue was “for the special use of the goon squads who want to burn our papers rather than let the auto workers of Flint know the truth about Homer Martin’s attempt to lead them out of the CIO” (“Fire! Fire!” 4).

Meanwhile, comics depicting goons, as well as references to goons and goon squads became a staple of the *Flint Auto Worker*. Marlatt’s strategy of using comic goons was to evoke laughter from the workers who might otherwise fear the real thugs. As he later wrote, “The consequence was that Flint began laughing at them and when they started laughing they no longer feared them and the power seized by brutality was broken” (“Lilacs” 103). Marlatt specifically recalled that Alice the Goon was “then popular in the syndicated Popeye cartoon strip,” and that the comics featuring pro-Martin henchmen portrayed as goons were a favorite for anti-Martin readers (“Lilacs” 86). Marlatt described Alice the Goon as being a “powerful, shapeless character of tremendous strength but he [sic] personification of dumbness” (“Lilacs,” 102). The staff of the *Flint Auto Worker*, according to Marlatt, “placed her in all sorts of stupid situations wherein she made equally stupid decisions and the theme so closely resembled the current situation in Flint [that] the character portrayed in the Cartoon [sic] was replaced in the minds of many of the workers in the plants by the identities of the real life bullies who had almost wrecked their union” (“Lilacs 102”).

In addition to depicting Martin supporters as Alice-the-Goon-type figures, Marlatt and his colleagues at the *Flint Auto Worker* relentlessly worked the word “goon” into

frequent quips, briefs and articles. The results range from witty to bordering on absurd to downright groan-inducing. As an example of the latter, in one issue, a boxed item titled “Fine Book” announces that “GOON WITH THE WIND” is Flint’s “Book of the Month.” The item briefly describes a plotline involving Martin and his goons. “In a sense it’s a tragedy,” reads an especially apt line from the notice. “[I]n another sense it’s high comedy” (4). The newspaper also gave away original drawings of the “pro-Martin” goon comics to autoworkers who submitted the best news from their locals (“Prize” 4; “Prize Winners” 3).

While Marlatt’s recollections shed light on the popularity of the word “goon” among autoworkers, he does not fully account for the use of the word among autoworker poets. Still, it seems clear that the word “goon”—used in poetic and song lyrics—served a similar purpose to the drawings of goon comics. Similar to goon drawings, positioning goons into poetic lines minimized the psychological fear that actual henchmen inspired by framing them into a comical conception. This seems to be especially the case in the song parody “Flip-Flop Homer’s Lament,” which appeared in the *Flint Auto Worker* in March of 1939. The lyrics, credited to a “Chevy Worker,” parody “Old McDonald Had a Farm” and poke fun of Martin’s growing political isolation. One verse addresses his trouble with goon squads:

He took his goon squads to Detroit
C-I, C-I, O.
Even they wouldn’t listen to him exploit
The C-I, C-I, O.
With a goon squad here and a goon squad there,
And not a one good union man anywhere,
You should’ve seen Ol’ Flip-Flop tear his hair;
C-I, C-I, O. (Chevy Worker 3)

For autoworkers reading “Flip-Flop Homer’s Lament,” Old McDonald’s farm becomes the shadow of the poem—but this time the reader imagines not Old McDonald on his noisy farm, but Martin cast as an inept, Chaplin-esque figure, pulling out his hair, unable to organize the chaos around him. On another level, we know that when Flint workers imagined goons, rather than thinking of actual men, they pictured figures resembling Alice the Goon. Given the cultural connotations of the word “goon” in the 1930s, its use in “Flip-Flop Homer’s Lament,” allowed workers to equate Martin’s very real violent henchmen with a widely-known comic figure. Such comparisons helped to shore up the courage of autoworkers involved in the factional fight by making actual goons seem less menacing.

What about the UAW-AFL poems?

Anti-Martin unionists were not the only ones writing poetic responses to UAW factionalism. While the early anti-Martin poems elicited further poetic responses among Martin’s enemies, they also inspired poems from Martin’s supporters. The anti-Martin poems were answered by three biting, anti-CIO poems of a similar style—poems that highlighted grievances directed toward the members of the UAW-CIO. These poems, all of which were anonymous, appeared in the *AFL Auto Worker*, the newspaper organ of Martin’s rump union. These poems are a rather tardy volley, not appearing until November of 1939, the same month that the last of the twenty-three anti-Martin poems I found appeared in the UAW-CIO press.⁷⁶

One of the pro-UAW-AFL poems is actually an answer to a poem that appeared in a special edition of the UAW newspaper issued for Dodge readers. (I have not found the original, but the initial poem is printed along with the reply.) The reply poem was

published in January, 1940. The columnist writes that stewards of the UAW-CIO have been shaking down workers to pay dues. By way evidence, he shares a with readers a poem that shows “[t]he affect that such intimidation is having” (“Dodge News” 4). The premise of the UAW poem is that men named Hill and Watson (presumably shop stewards) need to get a worker named Ralph to pay his dues. The poem’s tone is one of very real intimidation. It reads:

High Hung, high belly sick,
Hill and Watson better be quick,
Ralph worked on the washing machine
‘Til his face is blue and his eyes are green.
Poor old Ralph, he’s got the blues,
He has not yet paid his Union dues.
He won’t give the CIO a call.
If he doesn’t pay up down he will fall.
Watson you had better shake your ear,
And get Ralp’s [sic] dues this New Year.
Get him while getting is good,
Or maybe he will be misunderstood. (“Dodge News” 4)

While poems urging the payment of dues were common fodder in the pages of union newspapers, this is poem, directed at a single worker for not paying dues, is an anomaly for its particularly threatening tone. The final line, suggesting that if Ralph does not pay his dues, “maybe he will be misunderstood,” may seem innocuous, but in the culture of “flying squadrons” and goons, such threats could well have been quite serious. However, the poetic response from “Ralph,” is hardly that of one who has been cowed. Rather, Ralph asserts his intention to withhold dues from a union he finds undemocratic. It reads, in part:

Listen Watson, you too Bill Hill,
I’ve told you before, and I tell you still.
We’re out to show you
Don’t you see?
How a Union is run

With Democracy.
 Of course “we know,” that’s out
 Of your line,
 For we leave the dictator
 Far behind.
 We’ve had enough of your lawlessness
 Where half the gang is Communist.
 I may run the washer, or
 I may sweep the floor.
 But to your gang, I’ll pay no-more.
 So I paid my buck, to the AFL
 And by the way, we’re doing swell.
 We’ll fight our grievances
 And fight ’em right,
 But to win three cents
 There’ll be no strike.
 For a little judgment
 Now and then,
 Will lead the way
 To a peaceful end. (“Dodge News” 4)

The premise of this reply by “Ralph,” is that the speaker refuses to pay dues to an organization “Where half the gang is Communist.” The first two lines, beginning “Listen Watson, you too Bill Hill / I’ve told you before and I’ll tell you still,” serve to show that the speaker has not been intimidated by the implicit threat of the first poem. In his poem “Ralph,”—like many of the anti-Martin poets—is also concerned about issues of democracy within the union. But rather in his poem, it is the Communists, rather than the Red-baiting Martin, who prevent the union from being democratic. To underline this point, this poet mentions that the members of the UAW-AFL have enough self-discipline to avoid having strikes for issues as petty as “three cents,” perhaps referencing the wildcat strikes, which Martin blamed on Communist elements of the UAW.

Notably, just as the speaker in “Clear the Road” takes Martin to task because he [Martin] “shuns the men in overalls,” “Ralph” calls out the poets from Dodge for poetically mocking his menial labor of running the washer and sweeping the floor. In

both cases, the poets counter their political foes not by flashing signifiers of wealth, but by identifying with signifiers of the working-class. In this case, it is the UAW-CIO members—rather than Martin—who have betrayed a code of class solidarity by shaking down a menial laborer. While the poem by “Ralph” is clearly on the opposite side of the factional fight, the idea that this poem shares a concern with union democracy and calling out violations of working-class solidarity shows that these were matters of deep importance to workers of both sides of the factional divide.

Another poem from the pro-Martin camp that accuses the UAW-CIO of communism is “Gory Goons,” which ran in the *AFL Auto Worker* on November 28, 1939. In this case, the threat is not communism alone, but an alliance between “Reds and Nazis” that poses a threat to union democracy. Notably, this poem appeared only three months following the German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact agreement between Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin—and the subsequent invasion of Poland by both the Nazis and the Soviets. These events figure heavily to this poem. It reads:

*“There’s too much peace,” John L. declared,
“My damage still can be repaired;
Unless by force I gain respect,
My dynasty will soon be wrecked.”*

With Reds and Nazis hand in hand
Both clubbing victims for their stand,
It’s plain to see whom John’s buffoons
Are aping with their gawky goons.

*“Confuse the workers, split their ranks.
And I will win Der Fuehrer’s thanks
In payment fame will come to you.
As members of the Gestapoo.” (3)*

So [gory goons?] with bloody hands,
Have carried out John L’s commands
To batter heads and foster hate,

So he might share Herr Hitler's fate.

With drooling mouths and addled brains,
They stalk the streets while terror reigns;
But right o'er might will soon prevail,
As John L's thugs are forced to sail. (3)

With the Hitler-Stalin pact in the background, this poem positions Lewis as Stalin, hoping to "share Herr Hitler's fate" as a formidable dictator. The poem further implies that the CIO leader adopts Nazi-style violent control in a quest for fame and power. Just as Stalin's motive was to protect the USSR, Lewis's motive in adopting militancy (within the poem) is to save his "dynasty"—or the CIO. The poem further links the CIO's anti-Martin stance with the idea that Lewis (as head of the CIO) is a Communist.

In reality, Lewis was not a Communist. Nonetheless he understood the benefits of drawing from the organizational strengths of Communist organizers within the CIO (Lichtenstein, "Communist" 121, Lichtenstein, *Dangerous* 116). Lewis famously answered anti-Communist detractors by quipping, "Who gets the bird? The hunter or the dog?" (qtd. in Lichtenstein "Communist" 121). Nonetheless, the poem exploits the deep fear and distrust that many Americans had for Communists, especially following Stalin's alliance with Hitler (see Barnard 167). At the time, even Americans on the left felt deeply uneasy about the pact, which "seemed a cynical betrayal of the Popular Front against Nazism" (Barnard 167). Finally, this poem reflects the real violence UAW factionalism inspired and reminds the contemporary reader that the UAW-CIO's paramilitary "flying squadrons" could be as frightening to UAW-AFL workers as Martin's goons were to anti-Martin unionists. It is also of note that the term "goon" was used by both sides in the factional fight, rather than by simply one or the other. While pro- and anti-Martin poets

supported differing factional agendas—their language was similar, showing that both types of poets participated in a larger specialized discourse unique to union culture.

In this chapter, I have examined a range of anti-Martin poems written in the final years of the Great Depression. I have contextualized these poems by providing a narrative of the historical events that led to Martin’s departure—events that inspired much of the poetry about him. While autoworker poets had previously used poetry to skewer scabs and company executives, they had yet to turn collectively on a single leader of their own movement. The aggressive tone of this poetic discourse somewhat ironically underscores a common desire by these poets to reassert that their union should be run democratically, a value that was less often expressed before the Martin drama played out.

As I have shown, several of these poets conjure an idealistically hopeful—and ultimately unrealized—vision of the post-Martin UAW. The idea that future UAW leaders would unilaterally support worker-initiated strikes or maintain radically egalitarian unions was optimistic, given the further bureaucratization of the UAW, its WWII no-strike agreement, and its anti-communist purges of the 1940s. Still, the assertion of the power held by regular union members seems to have created a moment in which rank-and-file poets could re-evaluate the sort of leadership they wanted their union to have. By writing poems caricaturing Martin, autoworker poets—for a brief moment—poetically defined the sort of union leaders they did and did not want. Similarly, by mocking Martin’s henchmen (and on the pro-Martin side, UAW “flying squadrons”) as goons, union members could transform violent thugs into figures worthy of mockery. We further see that, by reframing goons in the female figure of Alice the Goon—a popular cartoon character—union members culled an image from popular culture to conceptualize

and temper the uncertainty and fear triggered by factional violence. Finally, we see that poets on both sides of the UAW's factional struggle used poetry as a means for exploring and redefining their union identities. And ultimately, poets on both sides employed similar language and made similar assertions to do so.

Notes

¹ Marsh demonstrates, for example, that a poem by Ralph H. Marlatt titled “Have you ever worked on a line puttin’ out five thousand bodies a day?” can be linked to the history of the assembly line and management control over workers. Throughout the poem, the speaker’s description of his work is interrupted by the line, “Bend, lift, hammer, screw,” revealing the monotony and lack of agency in assembly line work. Marsh concludes that the poem “suggests [...] workers experience the assembly line as a loss of control: not just over the output or pace of their work [...] but also over their own bodies.”

² While Denning’s masterful work has been widely praised, it has also received some criticism for Denning’s ambitious and wide-ranging conception of the cultural front. As Andrew Hemingway observes, Denning’s framing of the cultural front as a broad-based leftist popular arts movement perhaps goes too far toward negating previous conceptions of the formation of mid-twentieth century culture. He writes, “In his resolute refusal of the clichés of thirties scholarship, Denning has arguably left both the Communist cultural movement and the New Deal arts programmes too much outside the frame” (172). Significantly, Hemingway observes that “[at] the least, we need to know more about how different perceptions of the Soviet Union in that country inflected the politics of culture for newly-unionized industrial workers [...] It is possible to over-Americanize the history of American radicalism” (172). Others, including Michael Rogin, have claimed that Denning’s account of the cultural front downplays cultural-shaping political movements altogether. While he otherwise praises *The Cultural Front* as “the most important book yet written on American culture in the Age of the CIO,” Rogin also concludes Denning’s account goes too far to deemphasize the political dissent of the period: “Although Denning rightly, and with Orson Welles brilliantly, places anti-fascism at the Popular Front center, antifascist and domestic multiethnic feelings entirely block out the purge trials, the war within the Spanish Civil War, the Stalin-Hitler pact, and the no-strike pledge.” He continues, “In Denning’s war of position, solidarity takes precedence over liberation and political controversy” (713). Michael Kazin takes a rather different approach to his critique, claiming that Denning’s analysis of works of art is perhaps *too* politically based, without properly acknowledging a work’s potential for aesthetic appeal. Kazin sums up Denning’s criticism of *Citizen Kane*, in which “Denning analyzes how Welles paid backhanded homage to the enemy’s powers of persuasion” by borrowing from fascist tropes. However, in Kazin’s opinion, “*Citizen Kane* may have originated as a left-wing take on media Mussolinis, but its art transcends that of time and its conflicts.” Kazin notes that Denning’s narrow analysis of the film misses the idea that “Kane’s tragedy echoes the fatal quest of Captain Ahab and of a number of Shakespearean villains—particularly Macbeth and Richard III—who also engender the kind of empathy that comes from recognizing their human flaws” (n.p.) Hemingway, Andrew. “Middlebrow: For and Against.” Rev. of *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of*

American Culture in the Twentieth Century, by Michael Denning. *Oxford Art Journal* 22.1 (1999): 166-176. JSTOR. Web. 21 Apr. 2014; Kazin, Michael. "Left With The Arts." Rev. of *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*, by Michael Denning. *Dissent* 45.1 (1998): 139-142. *Left Index*. Web. 22 Apr. 2014; and Rogin, Michael. Rev. of *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*, by Michael Denning. *The Journal of American History*. 84.2 (1997): 712. JSTOR. Web. 21 Apr. 2014.

³ Denning's inclusive view is quite different from the analysis of *Partisan Review* editors of the late 1930s who derided the Popular Front as overly prescriptive and political. Such claims are often cited (either directly or indirectly) as those that scholars in more recent years are working to counteract. Chris Vials is one scholar who confronts these claims more directly, by mentioning *Partisan Review* by name and citing recent scholarship offering an alternative perspective. See: Vials, Chris. *Realism for the Masses: Aesthetics, Popular Front Pluralism, and U.S. Culture, 1935-1947*. Jackson: U P of Mississippi, 2009. xvii-xviii. Internet resource. Typical of an anti-Popular Front critique is Lionel Trilling's 1939 assertion that critics of Ernest Hemingway pressured the writer into using his art to champion proletarian causes; this was pressure that Hemingway presumably took to heart, and it led him to, consequently, write in a way that Trilling found more transparently political and contrived. As Trilling writes, "An attempt has been made to settle the problem of the artist's [Hemingway's] relation to politics by loudly making the requirement that he give up his base individuality and rescue humanity and his own soul by becoming the mouthpiece of a party, a movement or a philosophy. That requirement has demonstrably failed as a solution of [sic] the problem; the problem, however still remains" (60). See: Trilling, Lionel. "Hemingway and his Critics." *Partisan Review* 6.2 (1939): 52-60. *Partisan Review Online* – Howard Gotlieb Center at Boston University. Web. 23 Apr. 2014.

In contrast to Trilling, scholars in recent years have noted the freedom allowed by a political climate that was perhaps less codified and polemic than that of the later twentieth century. For instance, Michael Kimmage, author of *The Conservative Turn: Lionel Trilling, Whittaker Chambers, and the Lessons of Anti-Communism*, which offers a mostly sympathetic, if (at times) critical intervention into Trilling's criticism, notes that "In the years between 1935 and 1939 one could entertain radical dreams that included the New Deal and the Soviet experiment, American democracy and Soviet communism." He continues, "This was the era of the Popular Front when the party itself sanctioned a flexible commitment to communism" (47). See: Kimmage, Michael. *The Conservative Turn: Lionel Trilling, Whittaker Chambers, and the Lessons of Anti-Communism*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard U P, 2009. Internet resource.

⁴ Foner follows in the footsteps of folklorist John Greenway, who collected and contextualized a smaller selection of protest songs in *American Folksongs of Protest* (1953). Important precursors of Foner's study also include studies by folklorists of mining culture George Korson and Archie Green. Korson anthologized American mining

lore in *Minstrels of the Mine Patch: Songs and Stories of the Anthracite Industry* (1938); Green's *Only a Miner: Studies in the Recorded Coal-Mining Songs* (1972) provides a rich critical context for roughly twelve recorded songs with origins in American mining culture.

⁵ Such songs, in which lyrics can be substituted, were eventually known as “zipper” songs; for example, American twentieth-century folksinger Lee Hays defined a zipper song as “a simple folk tune built on repeated lines and so constructed that you have to zip [i]n only a word or two to make an entirely new verse.” He traces the term to “the first issue of the *People's Songs* bulletin,” published in 1946 (63). See: Hays, Lee. “The First Zipper Song.” “*Sing Out, Warning! Sing Out, Love!*”; *The Writings of Lee Hays*. Ed. Robert Steven Koppelman. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 2003. Print.

⁶ Although the poetry of the literary left was largely neglected until the late 1980s, more recent scholarship concerning this work has been prolific. Works concerning the literary left of the 1930s include, but are not limited to the following: Barnard, Rita. *The Great Depression and the Culture of Abundance: Kenneth Fearing, Nathanael West, and Mass Culture in the 1930s*. Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1995; Coiner, Constance. *Better Red: The Writing and Resistance of Tillie Olsen and Meridel Le Sueur*. New York: Oxford U P, 1995; Davidson, Michael. *Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material Word*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1997; Denning, Michael. *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*. Brooklyn: Verso, 1997; Foley, Barbara. *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941*. Durham: Duke U P, 1993; Murphy, James F. *The Proletarian Moment: The Controversy Over Leftism in Literature*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1991; Nelson, Cary. *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910-1945*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1989; Rabinowitz, Paula. *Labor & Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1991; Schocket, Eric. *Vanishing Moments: Class and American Literature*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006; Wald, Alan M. *Exiles from a Future Time: The Forging of the Mid-Twentieth-Century Literary Left*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2002.

⁷ Scholarly work that offers an exploration and analysis of the literature of this movement includes: James Murphy's *The Proletarian Moment: The Controversy Over Leftism in Literature* (1991), Paula Rabinowitz's *Labor & Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America* (1991), Barbara Foley's *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (1993), Alan Wald's *Exiles from a Future Time: The Forging of the Mid-Twentieth-Century Literary Left* (2002), Cary Nelson's *Revolutionary Memory: Recovering the Poetry of the American Left* (2003), and recently Chris Vials's *Realism for the Masses: Aesthetics, Popular Front Pluralism, and U.S. Culture, 1935-1947* (2014).

⁸ Alan Wald, in *Exiles from a Future Time: The Forging of the Mid-Twentieth-Century Literary Left* (2002), divides the Leftist poetry of the 1930s into two phases, with poets in the first half of the decade writing proletarian-oriented poetry, or as Wald writes, “poetry that seemed most befitting to the longing that one’s art might serve as a ‘weapon’ in the ‘class struggle’” (13). In the latter half of the decade, this orientation turned toward the “Popular Front” and was “then theorized as an instrument in the ‘anti-fascist struggle’” (13). Each phase is rather porous, with many exceptions extending beyond these defined periods (13).

⁹ Marsh concludes that until the 1980s, literary scholars largely neglected the leftist literature produced in the 1930s due to the “poetic and political prejudices of the New Criticism” and out of fear of being associated with Communism (“Introduction” 3). When literary scholars did begin writing about the literature of the 1930s they—like modernist scholars—concentrated on a specific literary cadre: professional writers associated with the communist movement. As Marsh describes, scholars “focused on those literary and cultural figures who may have sympathized with, identified with, and sought to advance the interests of workers, but who nevertheless considered themselves primarily writers, directors, performers, or other culture workers” (3). Such a characterization, of course, remains controversial, with many critics pointing out the diversity of the Communist Party and the various backgrounds of writers and editors associated with the literary left (Schocket 199). Supporting Marsh’s summation, Eric Schocket in his book *Vanishing Moments: Class and American Literature* for instance, exhumes *Partisan Review* editor Philip Rahv oft-quoted 1939 pronouncement on the proletarian literature movement: “It is clear that proletarian literature is the literature of a party disguised as the literature of a class” (qtd. in Schocket 199); Schocket then elaborates on the numerous scholars who have taken issue with this proclamation (199). Those who argue against it, he writes in summation, generally argue “that the Left of the 1930s was pluralist and/or the party nondoctrinal” on one hand, or, on the other, “assert the particular power of authorial transcendence” by arguing that “Rahv was right but that certain writers rose above doctrine to produce art” (199). However, Schocket’s conclusion, after examining the scholarship, augments Marsh’s claim: “Though the movement was self-consciously proletarian,” writes Schocket, “most of the authors involved in the journals and clubs that formed its institutional base were from the middle class, an aspect of their identity that occasioned no little amount of concern and self-criticism” (199). Indeed, as Schocket describes, a frequent topic addressed by literary leftist critics Mike Gold, V. F. Calverton, and Granville Hicks was the necessary experiences a writer must endure to form an authentic expression of the proletarian viewpoint (200-04).

¹⁰ Some of my findings and observations about autoworker poets overlap with those of Greenberg (although his remarks concern CIO poets more generally). As he writes, “Grievances [in poems by workers] highlight the fast pace of machinery and the Taylorized personnel practices of the large corporate firm, including close supervision by

foremen. Before the CIO, industrial workers were treated like slaves. We see the widespread persistence of a producer consciousness. ("We are the Builders.") Poets stress the benefits of collective action through unions and write in existential terms about a freedom struggle. There is more praise for local leaders than for national ones. Sometimes the verse becomes embroiled in factional union struggles" (414-415).

¹¹ Aside from "At the Golden Gate," which I examine in this article, autoworker poets made frequent use of Psalm 23, which begins "The Lord is my shepherd..."

¹² This debate is also referenced by Alan Wald and Sarah Ehlers. See: Wald, Alan M. *Exiles from a Future Time: The Forging of the Mid-Twentieth-Century Literary Left*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2002. Print. 128-30 and Ehlers, Sarah. *Red or Dead: States of Poetry in Depression America*. Diss. U of Michigan, 2012. 92. Electronic resource.

¹³ My thinking about strength and wit expressed in the poetry of Depression-era autoworkers grew out of my reading Nicholas K. Bromell's observations in *By the Sweat of the Brow: Literature and Labor in Antebellum America*. Bromell has traced the pervasive use of the separation between "mind" and "hand" in descriptions of antebellum labor, and the work of mechanics in particular. He writes that during the antebellum period, mechanics were caught in a kind of cross-definitional stream; the residual meaning of "mechanic" signified the use of "hands" and tools, and the emerging definition lauded the "mind," by implying the genius of those who invented new, labor-saving machines. In such a configuration, the work of the "hands" became something altogether separated from the work of the "mind"—and the work of the hands seemed obsolete and of little value (41-58). See: Bromell, Nicholas K. *By the Sweat of the Brow: Literature and Labor in Antebellum America*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993. Print.

¹⁴ Raymond Williams discusses uneven cultural development in *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977. 121-127. Print.

¹⁵ The songs were also featured in the *United Automobile Worker* issue of January 22, 1937. As an editorial note explains, the lyrics were all written by strikers in Flint, as they occupied their workplaces, demanding recognition of their union. The editor acknowledges that the seven featured songs—other than "Sit-Down," composed by labor attorney Maurice Sugar—were written to be sung with older melodies. But he also notes that despite their reliance on older songs, the workers "nevertheless, express a collective creative activity that is rare enough in American life" (7). He continues: "The words are often exceptionally apt and descriptive. There is no reason to believe that original tunes will not be created also as our composers gain confidence" (7). It remains unclear just how many "original tunes" were ever composed during the Flint sit-down strike. But the Flint sit-down songs printed under the jubilant headline, "STRIKE SONGS: Battle, Victory, Joy" were fairly typical of strike songs of the era in that they repurposed older

tunes. The autoworkers, in particular, however, used these adaptations of songs to narrate events of strikes soon after incidents unfolded—referring to specific names and events that eventually took on legendary status. (Timothy Lynch describes this practice specifically in terms of the Flint sit-down. See his book *Strike Songs of the Depression*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2001. Print.) This practice of re-purposing old tunes, of course, dates back centuries—and is the natural extension of the evolution of ballads and folk songs by word of mouth, before the mass production of popular sheet music, radios, and records. Indeed, however much the writer of the editorial note predicted that autoworkers were on the verge of composing original songs, the workers themselves considered popular tunes fair game for shaping new material and seemed to hold no qualms about composing new lyrics to fill them.

¹⁶ For a detailed account of the role of communism within the CIO, see: Lichtenstein, Nelson. “The Communist Experience in American Trade Unions.” *Industrial Relations*. 19:2 (1980): 119-39.

¹⁷ Quoting David Montgomery, Meyer notes that the noted labor historian “perhaps unwittingly, inaugurated the historical discussion of working-class manhood when he described the aggressive and respectable ‘craftsmen’s ethical’ code, which demanded a ‘manly’ bearing toward the boss,’ connoting ‘dignity, respectability, defiant egalitarianism, and patriarchal male supremacy.” Meyer continues, “On the other hand, the rough masculine culture correlated to the tradition and values of unskilled laborers and certainly countered the respectable values of the craft tradition. The rough laborer’s world formed a ‘life-style that,’ Montgomery observed, ‘made a mockery of social reformers’ efforts to promote habits of ‘thrift, sobriety, adaptability, [and] initiative’” (qtd. in Meyer 117).

¹⁸ The grievances of autoworkers that Meyer examined are rife with narratives about masculine horseplay and other incidents in which “testosterone-filled workers aggressively displaying their ‘manly bearing’” (124). Knife fights, fistfights, workplace drunkenness, and practical jokes gone awry were not uncommon. Unsurprisingly, some such incidents resulted in injury to workers. For instance, in 1937 a Briggs employee grew fed up with two co-workers who repeatedly threw chalk at him and teased him for having shaved his hair. He attempted to retaliate by throwing a hammer at one of his tormentors. But the hammer missed its mark and instead hit an uninvolved bystander, splitting the man’s lip (124).

Occasionally, evidence of horseplay appeared in poems that appeared in UAW material. One of the most visceral was actually written by the granddaughter of a Motor Wheel worker Emma Elsenheimer. The poem, titled “Motor Wheel Cockroach,” warns autoworkers to stop playing tricks on her grandfather, who she describes as “a quiet man” who “doesn’t have much to say” (6). While in itself, the poem does not take up a masculine persona, it does reveal a sense of how workplace pranks could have unintended affects, whatever their intention. Two stanzas of the poem read:

Some workers caught a cockroach,
And thought it would be fun
To put it in my Gramp's lunchbox,
A nibbling on the crumbs.

That night the house was quiet,
You couldn't hear a mouse.
All at once Grandma screamed out,
"There's a cockroach in the house." (4)

The poem ends with a stern, yet lighthearted reprimand for the tricksters, indicating that the poet shared in at least some of the humor of the prank: "Leave Mr. Cockroach in the shop, / Vacate or fumigate" (4). See Elsenheimer, Emma. "Motor Wheel Cockroach." *Lansing Auto Worker* 28 Feb. 1940: 4. Microfilm Reel: *Flint Auto Worker*, 1939: Feb. 23-May 9.

Horseplay (or what we would likely label "workplace bullying" today) is also in evidence in some worker-correspondence of UAW newspapers. For instance, a jocular notice in the *The Flint Auto Worker* of 1938, submitted by a volunteer worker correspondent, was playfully titled "Da! Da!"—and it strongly insinuated oral sex between male workers. It read: "The boys in Chevrolet 644 have noticed that Paul Loisel has had his teeth out. We expect Jake Bowers to have his out very soon, too. The boys will take up a collection to buy the two boys some nice new knee pads" (7). Henry Kraus, a culturally middle-class activist and intellectual who edited *The Flint Auto Worker* at the time, was horrified when the meaning of the submission was explained to him—*after* the notice had already appeared in print. As he recalled years later, the notice "made fun of some guy who was a foreman's darling. [...] And I didn't really understand. I just didn't understand a thing." After Kraus received complaints, he ran an apology. Still, Kraus reported that—even some forty years later—a man mentioned to him how offensive some women autoworkers from A.C. Spark Plug had found the notice, and how they assumed that Kraus had not considered their readership when it appeared in the newspaper (Kraus interview with Ken Malone). See: "Da! Da!" *The Flint Auto Worker* 24 June, 1937: 7. Print. Labadie Storage: R2, B4, S3A. Labadie Collection. U of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI. 13 May 2014 and Kraus, Henry. Interviewing Ken Malone 29 July 1986. Flint Labor History Project. Genesee Historical Collections Center, Frances Willson Thompson Library, U of Michigan-Flint. Web. 14 Dec. 2015.

¹⁹ Montgomery breaks down what he calls the "four sources of employer's control" which are: 1) "the company's ownership of the means of production" (156), 2) "the context of the profit mechanism and market pricing in which all firms operate," 3) "the systematic integration of the firm's internal line of command into the country's enormous educational establishment," (157) and 4) "the coercive authority of the government" (158). See: Montgomery, David. "American workers and the New Deal formula." *Workers' Control in America: Studies in the History of Work, Technology, and Labor Struggles*. New York: Cambridge UP: 1979. 153-81. Print.

²⁰ John Marsh, in “United Auto Writers: Poetry from the United Auto Worker, 1937-1939,” similarly notes how Marlatt incorporates two forms of “bodies” into this poem—and how this poem and the poem “pressure...” by Poll, which I also cite, both embody the human toll of the speedup. As Marsh contends, “In the [Marlatt] poem, as on the assembly line, the car ‘bodies’ speeding down the assembly line have usurped in importance the human bodies employed to assemble them” (n.p.)

²¹ Roediger further finds that, while such terms may seem to condemn both abuse of factory workers and the practice of chattel slavery, in fact, the term was often used by racist lawmakers who supported Southern slavery, yet found northern treatment of white factory workers to be an abomination. See: Roediger, David. “White Slaves, Wage Slaves and Free White Labor.” *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. 2007 ed. New York: Verso, 2007. 65-92. Print.

²² Analysis of songs and poems by women specifically involved in the early UAW movement is minimal. Ivan Greenberg, in his article from *American Quarterly*, “Proletarian Literature from the Bottom Up: Workers and Poetry During the Rise of the CIO” (2015), provides a brief analysis of poems by women involved in the early CIO movement, including women associated with the UAW, which I mention in this chapter. Similarly, I also reference Timothy P. Lynch’s *Strike Songs of the Depression*, in which Lynch devotes a brief section to describing differences between songs sung by women and men participating in the 1936-36 Flint sit-strike. By and large, the most comprehensive history of women workers involved in the Depression-era UAW is Nancy Gabin’s excellent *Feminism in the Labor Movement: Women and the United Auto Workers, 1935-1975* (1990), which includes a chapter describing recruitment (or lack thereof) of women in the early years of the UAW—as well as an analysis of how women unionist’s roles intersected and sometimes conflicted with the roles of auxiliary members. Sharon Hartman Strom’s article “Challenging ‘Woman’s Place’: Feminism, the Left, and Industrial Unionism in the 1930s” (1983) provides helpful cultural and historical context regarding the organization of CIO women in the Great Depression more generally. Ruth Meyerowitz’s chapter “Organizing the United Automobile Workers: Women workers at the Ternstedt General Motors parts plant” from *Women, Work and Protest* (1985), edited by Ruth Milkman, offers a helpful case study of women Ternstedt workers who were involved in a successful 1937 slow-down against GM. In *Gender at Work: The Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex during World War II* (1987), Milkman herself compares the CIO’s Depression-era organizing of women in the automotive and electrical fields. While Elizabeth Faue’s *Community of Suffering and Struggle: Women, Men, and the Labor Movement in Minneapolis, 1915-1945* does not address UAW organizing specifically, she provides a fascinating gender analysis of the labor movement’s material culture of the Depression era. Patricia Yeghissian’s article “Emergence of the Red Berets” (1975) remains the most comprehensive account of the Flint Women’s Emergency Brigade. Sol and Genora Dollinger’s *Not Automatic: Women and the Left in the Forging of the Auto*

Workers' Union (2000) includes an informative oral history interview with Genora Dollinger, conducted by Susan Rosenthal. The interview focuses on Dollinger's role in forming the Flint Emergency Brigade. Dollinger is also featured in the labor classic *With Babies and Banners* (1979), a rousing documentary directed by Lorraine Gray about the history of Flint Women's Emergency Brigade. Both women UAW members and women's auxiliary members are also mentioned in several of the monograph histories of the UAW, but these references are brief—sometimes surprisingly so. John Barnard in *American Vanguard: The United Auto Workers During the Reuther Years, 1935-1970* (2004) provides some basic facts about union membership among women, as well as the role of women's auxiliaries. He addresses the common perception in the 1930s that women were difficult to organize (see 104). Nelson Lichtenstein in *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor* (1995) describes the role of women in Local 174, in particular. Sidney Fine in *Sit-Down: the General Motors Strike of 1936-1937* (1969) and Henry Kraus in *Heroes of Unwritten Story: The UAW, 1934-39* (1993) provide information about the formation of the Flint Women's Auxiliary and the Emergency Brigade.

²³ As of 1934, following the institution of the National Industrial Recovery Act minimum wage specifications, 22.5 percent of men earned a wage below 60 cents per hour; in comparison, 85.5 percent earned less than 60 cents per hour (Gabin 13-14; Tolles, N.A. and M. W. LaFever 547).

²⁴ A similar notice thanking auxiliary women in Detroit for their work on the Vote Labor campaign ran in the *United Automobile Worker* on November 11, 1937: "Without any fanfare or fuss, they took on themselves the drudgery of humdrum work—distributing literature, house to house canvassing, providing food for campaign workers, covering the polling booths on election day, and other thankless tasks. What they did would have gone undone if we hadn't had their help" (Strachan 6). Strachan, Alan. "Women's Auxiliary Thanked by Political Committee." *United Automobile Worker* 13 Nov. 1937: 6, Microfilm Reel: 1936-38.

²⁵ The prevailing complaint was simply that women were not treated with common human decency. As an anonymous A.C. Spark Plug worker wrote in *The Flint Auto Worker*, working at the plant was not unlike serving in prison: "In prison, you have a number, as you have here. In prison someone is always watching to see that you don't leave your place; as they do here. But by gosh! in prison you can at least speak to the person next to you without getting bawled out!" ("AC Workers, Is This the Truth?" *The Flint Auto Worker* 6 Feb. 1937: 5. Print. Labadie Storage: R2, B4, S3A. Labadie Collection. U of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI. 13 May 2014.)

²⁶ As organizers told the women, A.C. Spark Plug needed to keep running because it supplied parts for all auto manufactures—not just GM. And at the time, according to Mitchell, the purpose was to financially cripple GM, without harming its competitors.

²⁷ Mitchell later recalled that during the Flint sit-down, wearing her union button in solidarity with other female workers gave her the courage to tell her foreman that she no longer wanted to be responsible for counting the number of parts that came through that day—a job that she had normally taken on. “I was outspoken. It’s a wonder I didn’t get fired,” she recalled.’

²⁸ As Meyerowitz proposes, women autoworkers “lacked a feminist consciousness” even “in comparison with both and later periods” of organizing (231-32. See also Strom 379-80). As she continues, “Because they failed to understand the way the structure of society and of the union perpetuated male supremacy, they did not see the need for fundamental change. Instead, they identified a handful of issues affecting women and raised them in a manner uncharacteristic of their organizing on other union issues” (252). Gabin reached similar conclusions, finding that protests on behalf of issues of gender inequality within the 1930s labor movement were one-off events, not part of a larger organizing effort. She finds that the reasons were based on a number of issues, including “[t]he isolation of women in the plants, the paucity of female leaders, the prevalence of negative attitudes toward women, and the disinterest of male unionists in promoting equality (40). Like Meyerowitz, she concludes that another aspect of this failure relates to women autoworkers promoting class-based issues over those related to gender inequality. As she concludes of Depression-era women autoworkers, “[t]heir sense of themselves and unionism dictated that their class interests transcend their more particularistic concerns as women” (47).

²⁹ Genora Dollinger, the then young founder of the Flint’s Women’s Emergency Brigade, later recalled Roy, who was president of the Flint Auxiliary as the socialist wife of a Chevrolet autoworker who had been fired for union activity. Roy also taught public speaking and labor history classes for auxiliary and Emergency Brigade women. As Dollinger described her, “She was a very tall woman with a low and resonant voice. She seemed like a person who could handle any man or any opposition” (Dollinger and Dollinger 132; Dollinger). Dollinger, Genora. “I Want to be a Human Being.” Speech at Pioneers Reunion Meeting: 50th anniversary celebration of the Flint sit-down strike. UAW Union Hall, Flint, MI. 2 Aug. 1987. *Marxists Internet Archive*. (“From the *American Socialist* Collection of Sol Dollinger”) Web. 14 Sept. 2015.

³⁰ Journalist Mary Heaton Vorse relayed one of these stories in her article, “They had a Woman’s Day in Flint!” which appeared in *The Flint Auto Worker*. According to Vorse, at a meeting that followed a large protest march of auxiliary members in Flint, a woman from Detroit stood up to speak about growing organizing momentum. The woman from Detroit, told the women in attendance the story of a woman who could well be Baggett herself:

One of our best women started out hating unions. She came to the hall looking for her husband.

[According to the speaker the woman said,] “‘Where’s my husband?
Around here drinking beer?’ Of course he was on the picket line. We were very
short in the kitchen. We asked her if she wanted to help.

“‘Now I’m here I might as well.’ Now she is one of our best women and
no work is too hard for her. (2)

Vorse, Mary Heaton. “They Had a Woman’s Day in Flint.” *The Flint Auto Worker*. 6
Feb. 1937: 7. Print. Labadie Storage: R2, B4, S3A. Labadie Collection. U of Michigan,
Ann Arbor, MI. 13 May 2014.

³¹ A narrative of an *unconverted* wife made its way into at least one song written by a
male autoworker, John Santo, of Local 664 in Terrytown. The song, titled “Sing to the
CIO” is a first person narrative about a union member whose loyalty to the union is
unphased by his wife’s disapproval of his membership. Lines in the song include:

Yes, a union man—
And so they point at me when they see my union button—
The butcher man, the timekeeper and the storekeeper.
I was a striker on the picket line.
My wife was mad;
She called me cheap,
She wanted money for the housekeep
And for the rest of all the keeps—

I am a worker and know to say
I am the chicken that lays the egg.
Yes, my fellow worker, the golden egg—
My work, my union and so my pay—
The CIO shows me the way.
To be respected in part of life
As much by wife as by the town.
For when I work their life goes on—

Sing all for one, and one for all.
Sing high, sing low—
Sing to the CIO. (7)

In this poem, the speaker relies on the trope of the unconverted wife to strengthen his
masculine ethos. The speaker joined the picket line despite his wife’s approval and her
appeal that money was needed for domestic-related expenses. The lines: “She called me
cheap, / She wanted money for the housekeep / And for the rest of all the keeps—”
trivialize the wife’s requests for the money needed to run a household and imply that the
speaker doubts that his wife’s “keeps,” are truly for necessities, implying instead that she
will only spend money on feminine frivolity. The speaker shows that his wife’s
disapproval is no concern of his, as that despite her accusations of cheapness he is the
“chicken that lays the egg,” which is, he reminds his “fellow worker” “the golden egg.”

The speaker contrasts his wife's feminine spending on "the rest of the keeps" to his ability to earn money, implying that his union participation is what enables him to do this. As such, the speaker asserts his union membership to claim a masculine identity—one that he implies is eventually makes him "respected in life" by both his wife and the townspeople he sees in his public life. Saino, John. "Sing to the CIO." *United Automobile Worker* 9 Sept. 1939: 7, Microfilm Reel: 1939-43.

³² While some songs and poems evoked domestic themes to evoke a class-consciousness among women, others similarly evoked sentimental themes of motherhood to protest capitalist war-profiteering. For example, the three-stanza poem "Mother's Lament," by Jessie Morris of Cleveland, Ohio, appeared in the UAW Women's Auxiliary newsletter *Women in Auto*. In this poem, the speaker, a mother, describes raising a "gallant son," who she "taught to ... believe in good;" while making sure he "had inoculations, / Vaccination, proper shoes" as well as "fruits and vegetables." In the final four lines, the mother describes her disgust that war profiteers "[w]ith dried blood on their hands" would enlist her son for war. As she proclaims:

Oh, world, I didn't raise this son
For shell-shot to adorn,
If this war pulls us in, I'll wish
My son had not been born!

Similarly, Mary Schwartz, of Local 235, a local representing Chevrolet workers in Hamtramck, wrote a poem titled "Profiteers and Wars,"³² describing how war profiteers sacrifice mothers' children for their own economic gain. It reads as follows:

Why let war profiteers
Shed human blood and mother's tears?
They own the world's wealth with its battlefields,
They use our children as their millions' shields.
With our children they paint the battlefields red,
Overcrowd them with wounded and dead;
Over whom horses stumble
And after whom weep mothers poor and humble.
Jesus doesn't want his crosses
Upon the graves of needless human losses.
The ground that is painted red
Doesn't want to hold its needless dead.

In this poem, Schwartz combines traditional Christian iconography with the sentimental trope of the mother to support a timely anti-war and anti-capitalist political message. See: Morris, Jessie. "Mother's Lament." *Women's Auxiliary News* [Detroit] April. 1940: n.p. Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI. 8 May 2014; Schwartz, Mary. "Profiteers and Wars." *United Automobile Worker* 7 June 1939: 7, Microfilm Reel: 1939-43.

³³ The original poem was often reprinted, and it reads as follows:

I had a little tea-party,
This afternoon at three.
'T was very small,
Three guests in all,
Just I, Myself, and Me.

Myself ate up the sandwiches,
While I drank up the tea;
'T was also I
Who ate the pie,
And passed the cake to Me. (151)

See, for instance: North, Jessica Nelson. "Three Guests." *Saint Nicholas Illustrated Magazine for Boys and Girls* Nov. 1912: 151. *Google Play*. Web.

³⁴ Mike Chasar's *Everyday Reading: Poetry and Popular Culture in Modern America* (New York: Columbia UP, 2012) is helpful for informing the social history concerning how Americans have interacted with and found uses for poetry in the early twentieth century. He demonstrates that popular poetry was a far more pervasive aspect of popular culture in the early twentieth century than it is today; he describes how poetry was regularly published in newspapers, collected for scrapbooks, broadcast over the radio, and used in public advertising campaigns.

³⁵ Raymond Williams identifies "emergent," "dominant," and "residual," as useful terms for analyzing elements of uneven cultural development. As he explains, cultural elements can overlap, as emergent cultural elements coincide with dominant and residual cultural elements. (*Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977. 121-127. Print.)

³⁶ Aside from "At the Golden Gate," which I examine in this chapter, autoworker poets made frequent use of Psalm 23, which begins "The Lord is my shepherd..."

³⁷ Michael McKeon describes three "reigning narrative epistemologie(s)"—or narrative ways of truth telling—in the rise of the British novel. The earliest, he calls "romance idealism," which is writing that stems from the truths of "received a priori traditions." From here, with the seventeenth-century rise of empiricism and reliance on observation for truth finding, a new form of novel arises that relies on observed "evidence" rather than inherited truths to constitute a narrative. McKeon describes this this narrative type, "naïve empiricism." A third type, he describes as "extreme skepticism," a satirical form of writing McKeon claims emerged in the early novel in reaction to "naïve empiricism." Extreme skepticism typically parodies naïve empiricism—and along the way inadvertently "recapitulates some features of the romance idealism which it is equally committed to opposing" ("Generic" 384). McKeon, in his essay "Generic Transformation and Social Change: Rethinking the Rise of the Novel," and elsewhere, describes the

advantages and limits of these narrative types for articulating “conservative” and “progressive” ideologies—associated with the aristocratic and capitalist classes respectively.

³⁸ Evidence of its early history is somewhat contradictory. In early newspapers and anthologies, an editorial note often preceded the text of the poem explaining that “St. Peter at the Gate” “originally appeared in the *Brooklyn Eagle* under the title of ‘Thirty Years with a Shrew.’” This note was even reprinted in Hazel Felleman’s *The Best Loved Poems of the American People*, (Garden City, N.Y.: Garden City Pub. Co, 1936. 179.) Still, the claim is dubious, since Smiley lived in Michigan, and published his own newspaper. He likely published the poem himself. It seems likely that the *Goshen Democrat*, of Goshen Indiana, was another early publisher of the poem. In 1892 the newspaper reported with pride that “St. Peter at the Gate,” “the poem which appeared in the GOSHEN DEMOCRAT” had been reprinted in a newspaper in Blackfoot, Idaho” (“Wednesday, March 30, 1892.” *Goshen [Indiana] Democrat* 30 March 1892: 3. *Newspaper Archive*. Web. 9 Feb. 2015). This is a claim the newspaper’s editors would not have been so eager to boast about if the poem had been frequently reprinted. Later that same year, the *Democrat* reported that the newspaper had “received by mail a picture of Joseph Bert Smiley, the poet and humorist, of Galesburg, Mich.” whose poem “took the best of anything we have had lately” (“Personals.” *Goshen [Indiana] Democrat* 9 Nov. 1892: 3. *Newspaper Archive*. Web. 11 Feb. 2015). (Besides, the earliest mention I find of the poem appearing in the *Brooklyn Eagle* electronic archives was in 1893.) Whatever the case, the oft-printed, likely erroneous, introduction to the poem states that the verse “was founded upon the incidents of a case in the local police court.” Supposedly, a woman claimed that her husband was neglectful and cruel, and she brought her complaints to a city magistrate. However, according to the story, the woman annoyed the judge with her “tongue,” and instead of punishing the husband, the judge expressed sympathy for him and dismissed the case. Smiley’s self-published, illustrated book of the poem makes no mention of such a court case being his inspiration.

³⁹ Somewhat surprising to contemporary feminist perspectives, the poem seems to have been embraced by many women; by and large, amateur orators who recited the poem at church entertainment events, graduations, and club meetings were women. My searches of “St. Peter at the Gate” and “Thirty Years with a Shrew” (which the poem was alternatively titled) turned up several community notices on local church, entertainment, and charitable events, which appeared in American newspapers between 1894 and 1986. The following catalogue includes quotes from these newspapers to contextualize these poetic recitations, which were oftentimes enthusiastically received: “The Hyde Park division of the A. O. H., No. 10, installed its officers last night. The Hibernians of Norfolk county mustered strong oratory and patriotism flashed bright, and the gallant men of Division 10 showed the visitors how they could entertain in true Hibernian style [...] Maurice O’Donnell recited the ‘Artist’s Story,’ and for an encore gave ‘St. Peter at the Gate’” (6). “Hyde Park Hibernians.” *Boston Sunday Post* 15 July, 1894: 6.

Newspaper Archive Web. 11 Feb. 2015; Rhoda Cunningham recited the poem “St. Peter at the gate” at an evening of entertainment offered by “the Epworth League of the M. E. [Methodist Episcopalian?] church” (6). “Energy.” *New Castle* [Pennsylvania] *News* 16 Jan. 1895: 6. *Newspaper Archive* Web. 11 Feb. 2015; “Mrs. Barker delighted the audience with a recitation entitled, ‘Thirty Years With a Shrew,’ which was heartily encored. Mrs. Baker has a rare facility for putting an audience in good humor and was eminently successful on this occasion” (2). “Princess Long Concert.” *Mendocino Dispatch Democrat* [Ukiah City, Mendocino County, Cal.] 26 Nov. 1897: 2. *Newspaper Archive*. Web. 9 Feb. 2015; The poem was performed at a meeting of the Woman’s club of Whitehall, Montana: “Miss Lola Irvin, a young elocutionist of great promise, next recited, ‘Thirty Years with a Shrew’” (11). “Woman’s Clubdom” *The Anaconda* [Montana] *Standard*. 21 Dec. 1913: 11. *Newspaper Archive*. Web. 9 Feb. 2015; “Edith Homer” reportedly was on the program to read “Thirty Years With a Shrew” as part of the Altar Guild of St. Matthew’s Lutheran Church in Hanover, Pennsylvania. “Program Tonight By Altar Guild.” *The Evening Sun* [Hanover, Penn.] 25 Feb. 1919: 1. *Newspaper Archive*. Web. 9 Feb. 2015; “The first event on the program was a humorous reading by Miss Elizabeth Roberts of the Oshkosh State Teachers’ college, ‘Thirty Years With a Shrew’” (20). “Chicago Minister [was?] Speaker at St. David’s Day Event.” *Oshkosh* [Wisconsin] *Daily Northwestern* 2 March 1928: 20. *Newspaper Archive*. Web. 9 Feb. 2015; “The program included ... a humorous reading, ‘“Thirty Years With a Shrew,”’ by Miss Marietta Custer of Shoshone, Idaho” (10). “Annual Tea Enjoyed By St. Mary’s Faculty.” *Salt Lake Tribune* 17 Sept. 1933: 10. *Newspaper Archive*. Web. 9 Feb. 2015; The poem was recited during a special ceremony honoring former officers of a Masonic organization in Moberly, Missouri in January of 1950: “A short program was presented with Mrs. Russell Tedford reading, ‘Thirty Years With a Shrew’ and Dr. William R. Newby whistling ‘Shadow Waltz’ and ‘Nola,’ accompanied by Mrs. Newby” (4). “Shrine Past Officers Honored at Dinner; Ceremonial Planned.” *Moberly* [Missouri] *Monitor Index* 17 Jan. 1950: 4. *Newspaper Archive*. Web. 9 Feb. 2015; “Mr. and Mrs. Harry Remsberg entertained members of Glade Valley Grange on Tuesday evening for its annual weiner [sic] and corn roast. [...] The literary program included group singing, readings, ‘commence at home,’ by Thomas Cramer, and ‘Thirty Years with a Shrew,’ by Rev. Ben G. Hartley” (2). “Grange News: Glade Valley Grange.” *News* [Frederick, MD] 27 Aug. 1954: 2. *Newspaper Archive*. Web. 11 Feb. 2015. Even if the number of such performances dwindled as the twentieth century progressed, older Americans recalled “St. Peter at the Gate” into the 1980s. The most recent newspaper account I have found of a public “St. Peter at the Gate” recitation is from Dec. 23, 1986. In this account, a grandchild asked her grandmother, who was celebrating her 80th birthday, to recite the poem. This account supports my theory that this poem had become “residual” by the 1980s. “Happy Birthday.” *The Daily News* [Huntingdon, Saxton, and Mount Union, PA] 23 Dec. 1986: 9. *Newspaper Archive*. Web. 15 May. 2015. As an aside, Smiley himself did not live long enough to witness the longevity of his poem in American public life. In May of 1903, a farmer found him shot through the head near his father’s home in Indiana.

His death was deemed a suicide; he is said to have suffered from a nervous condition (“Suicide of Bert Smiley” 1; “Committed Suicide” 1).

⁴⁰ One early anthology that contained the poem was *The Progressive Speaker: Containing the Best Readings and Recitations for all Occasions* (Philadelphia: The National Publishing Co., 1897). The book proclaims the contemporary era a heyday of sorts for public readings and recitations, stating that “there never was a time when distinguished lecturers, orators and public speakers were in such great demand or received such liberal compensation as they do now” (v).

⁴¹ In 1903, and a few years after, the poem appeared reprinted several times attributed to “H. C. S. Charger, in *The Carpenter*.” Which issue of *The Carpenter* is unclear, and I have been unable to track down this the first printing of the poem attributed to Charger. Since union journals often printed poems sent in by readers, they sometimes erroneously attributed a poem’s authorship to the reader who sent the poem in. I am not sure what happened in this case, but it is possible that either “H. C. S. Charger” or “J. C. Carroll” was the original author. My guess is that the J. C. Carroll version is indeed the original, because small edits in the Charger version read to me as subtle improvements offered by a careful editor.

⁴² Davies cites: A.C. Mery Talys (1526) in Zall 1977: 132, Joke 78. A footnote after this citation reads: “Zall 1977. See also Oesterly 1970 [1866]: 106 Hazlitt 1884, vol I and 1887. The joke is also in Wardroper 1970: 119 and an apparently even earlier version is quoted in Hartley 1979: 492. For a discussion of the joke see Powell 1880:10 and 114-6.”

⁴³ For instance, the religious lines do not appear in the version that Nelson found. Nor do they appear in “Without a Card,” a shortened version of the parody that ran in the *United Automobile Worker* in 1938. Both of these reprints, however, retain St. Peter’s reference to the scab’s “gift of gab,”—a reference that makes less sense without the lines elaborating the scab’s talkative attributes. (Nelson 29; “Without a Card.” *United Automobile Worker*. [Detroit] 25 June. 1938: 2. Microfilm Reel: 1939-43.)

⁴⁴ I have found several archival newspaper references to American WWI veterans singing this song at American Legion events, and especially parades. Large parades featuring “Hinky-Dinky”-singing Legionnaires that I have found include some 80,000 veterans marching through the streets of Philadelphia during an American Legion a convention in 1926 and some 75,000 in a similar parade in Chicago in 1939. These seem to have quite festive affairs. The Chicago event was described by an Associated Press reporter this way: “Spectators crowded curbs, craned from windows of hotels and office buildings, peered from roofs. They applauded an impressive display here, laughed at a caper there and swayed to the strains of ‘Hinky Dinky Parley Voo’” (27). See: United Press. “Strains of ‘Hinky Dinky’ Echo Through Quaker City As Veterans Trod Streets.” *Athens Messenger* (Athens, OH) 11 Oct. 1926: 1. *Newspaper Archive*. Web. 18. Sept. 2014;

Associated Press. "More Than 1,000,000 View Legion's Parade." *Arizona Republic* (Phoenix, AZ) 27 Sept. 1939: 6. *Newspaper Archive*. Web. 18 Sept. 2014.

⁴⁵ Although the "kissed" version is more often printed, it also seems likely that soldiers would have sang a version more similar to the one below, which Vance Randolph writes he learned in 1928, at the age of eleven:

Mademoiselle from Armenteurs, (3 times)
She hasn't been fucked in forty years.

She was true to me and true to you, (3)
And true to the whole damn Army too.

The first three months and all was (went) well.

Parlay-voo!

The second three months she began to swell,

Parlay-voo!

The third three months and she gave a grunt,
And a little Marine jumped out of her cunt!

Hinky dinky parlay voo! (Randolph 514)

⁴⁶ Several composers appear to have claimed "Mademoiselle from Armentières" as their own. Among them are Gitz Rice, a WWI Canadian lieutenant who later went on to a career in vaudeville. His obituary claims that he "adapted the music of a French folk tune to create World War One's marching song..." (Associated Press. "Author of War I French Song Dies" *Indiana Evening Gazette* [Indiana, Pennsylvania] 17 Oct. 1947: 6. *Newspaper Archive*. Web. 18 Oct. 2014.)

⁴⁷ The 18th Amendment was certified on January 16, 1919, which was after the Armistice, on Nov. 11, 1918, but presumably before many soldiers had arrived back home. Both the House and Senate had passed prohibition resolutions in 1917; while the soldiers were at war, states were voting to ratify the amendment. ("Prohibition." *Newspaper & Current Periodical Reading Room*. Library of Congress. n. d. Web. 9 Dec. 2014.)

⁴⁸ My great aunt Shirl Lewis, who was born in 1924 and grew up in Nashua, New Hampshire, also recalls proposing new verses to "Mademoiselle from Armentières" while walking with friends to and from elementary school in the early 1930s. She was unaware that the song had any risqué verses.

⁴⁹ Police estimated 21,100 veterans were in Washington D.C. by July 1, 1932 (Dickson and Allen 136-37). Waters recorded the total number of Bonus Marchers at 28,540 (Dickson and Allen 319 fn10). Tracking down the number of veterans has been complicated by the fact that the book jacket for *The Bonus Army: An American Epic* lists

the total number of Bonus Marchers at “some 45,000.” But the sourced numbers mentioned inside the book are much closer to 25,000.

⁵⁰ The men reportedly sang this song in Caseyville, some eight miles from St. Louis. Volunteers drove the veterans to Caseyville when it became clear that the railroad officials had arranged for an east-bound train to be assembled in this location. Even though the veterans managed to get to Caseyville, the standoff with railroad officials continued until the local sheriff arranged for volunteers to transport the men to their next location (Dickson and Allen 70-72).

⁵¹ These included the elimination of more than 1,000 employee positions, two wage cuts of 10% each, and a stretch-out that the company imposed to prop up profits in a flooded textile market (Lynch 17, Salmond 14-23).

⁵² These include *Beyond Desire* (1932), by Sherwood Anderson; *Call Home the Heart* (1932), by Olive Tilford Dargan (under the pseudonym Fielding Burke); *To Make My Bread* (1932), by Grace Lumpkin; *Gathering Storm: A Story of the Black Belt* (1932), by Dorothy Myra Page; *The Shadow Before* (1934) by William Rollins Jr., and *Strike!* (1930), by Mary Heaton Vorse.

⁵³ Ella May is oftentimes remembered as Ella May Wiggins, although she dropped the “Wiggins” after her husband left her (Lynch 18, Salmond 51).

⁵⁴ I first learned about the Central Falls strike, as well as the 1932 Hunger March, referenced later, in Quenby Olmsted Hughes’s profile of Communist organizer Ann Burlak, ““Red Flame Burning Bright: Communist Labor Organizer Ann Burlak, Rhode Island Workers, and the New Deal.”

⁵⁵ Reuss and Reuss conclude that even the musicians themselves saw the weaknesses in such an approach, admitting that their “theories might be refined or eliminated at leisure,” after the demise of capitalism (45). In the Reuss’s estimation, the Collective’s compositions never caught on with the American working-class because the musicians took little interest in American music—instead looking toward European influences. For instance, they borrowed from Hanns Eisler, a tremendously successful German composer, who “became exceedingly popular in European political cabarets and radical street demonstrations” until the Nazis began seizing power, prompting Eisler to immigrate to the United States in 1933. However popular Eisler had been among working-class Germans, his style of music had little resonance with working-class Americans, despite the hopes and assumptions of Collective members (Reuss and Reuss 46). Eisler also had little patience for music of the folk tradition, once referring to it as “a badge of servitude from pre-revolutionary times” (qtd. in Reuss and Reuss 48).

⁵⁶ Denning later clarifies that the aim of the Composers’ Collective was to write songs for workers choruses, and that they eventually had some success writing for English-

language choruses of second-generation workers who had “self-selected” to be in such groups. These groups drew on both “the European mass song” and “the traditional American labor hymn,” such as the “Soup Song,” by Maurice Sugar, “Solidarity Forever,” and “We Shall Not Be Moved” (293). Further, a notable exception to the more esoteric compositions of the Collective were Seeger and Siegmeister’s “worker’s rounds,” which were songs with straightforward lyrics and even humor. According to Reuss and Reuss, “they contained the first humor to penetrate American radical music since the days of the IWW” and that their composition “marked one of the few times during these years that folksongs received any favorable mention from the orthodox leadership of the communist music movement” (48).

Even during the Third Period, as the Collective struggled to form a new proletarian music, some within the Communist Party believed in the usefulness of songs in the folk and protest traditions. The same year the Collective was founded, for instance, the *Red Song Book* was released by the Workers Music League. The book “included half a dozen Appalachian and other strike songs based on folk and popular tunes” including “ILD Song,” composed by Ella May of the Loray Mills strike (Reuss and Reuss 52). However, as Reuss and Reuss note, even this book was condemned in *The Worker Musician*—“the Workers Music League’s own house organ,” in which a reviewer “complain[ed] of the ‘immaturity’ and ‘arrested development’ of the Kentucky mining songs, and attribute[ed] the songs’ poor musical quality to the ‘exploitation of the coal barons.’” (qtd. in Reuss and Reuss 32).

⁵⁷ My evidence that Alan Lomax influenced Reuss’s assessment of northern labor songs stems from a quote Richard Reuss gathered from a 1968 interview with Lomax. As Reuss and Reuss write, “Labor unions outside of the radical fringe of the CIO proved to have little interest in music of any kind in spite of John L. Lewis’s often quoted *obiter dictum* ‘A Singing Army Is a Winning Army!’; ‘We offered them our lily-white bodies,’ Lomax ruefully recalled later, ‘but they weren’t interested.’” (129). As Reuss and Reuss claim, “Attempts to superimpose the traditions of the rural American heartlands on a city-oriented labor movement [...] at best had only a limited success and a certain artificiality” (107). This assessment implies that Lomax and the singers he promoted considered themselves to be purveyors of folk music when they visited northern union gatherings—and they were thus more interested in bringing rural folksongs to urban workers than investigating what northern workers themselves were writing and singing. Roy reaches a similar conclusion based on his assessment of Pete Seeger’s later (mostly unsuccessful) effort to promote singing among union members. As Roy writes, “Despite Seeger’s and others’ sincere desire to create singing unions and infuse music into the activities of contention, the organizational form fostered the music of performance more than participation. The vanguardist mentality can be seen even when they acknowledged that they were failing to reach their full constituency” (132).

⁵⁸ Roy’s writing about the formation of the Old Left’s folk music “entrepreneurship” informs my interpretation. Roy describes, for instance, how “[t]he cultural elite of the

folk project have valorized folk music precisely because it is the music of the common folk. The more marginal, humble, and unsophisticated the makers of music the better, at least from the perspective of the educated, urban folk enthusiasts” (19). Further, Roy makes interesting distinctions particular to the creation of the “folk” genre. Has notes that “those who invented the genre and those who performed were distinctively different groups. The scholars and antiquarians who invented and propounded the concept occupied distinctly different social worlds and interacted with the folk only occasionally when fieldworkers listened clinically to informants. ‘The folk’ did not think of themselves as folk and did not consider their music folk music. Informants singing for field sessions captured on Library of Congress tapes made little distinction between the songs learned from their parents, songs on the radio, or songs learned from sheet music” (77). For various conceptions of “folk” and “folk music,” see 52-3.

⁵⁹ Here, I find a situation that seems to affirm William Roy’s contention that a song’s lyrics alone cannot give us an accurate understanding of that’s songs meaning for others. Its social context must be studied as well, given the social function of music (2).

⁶⁰ The song seems to have been a favorite among other sit-downers within the auto industry as well. Some six hundred Kansas City Ford workers staged a 30-hour sit-down strike after the company announced the layoffs of 200-350 workers. Ford executives and union negotiators settled the strike within four hours of negotiations, with Ford agreeing to reinstate the laid-off workers (United Press, “Ford Workers...” 1 and 6A). As the final settlement was being reached, a reporter at the plant watched strikers, led by a band, poured out of the plant. They danced in a “snake-dance” three men wide, “reminiscent of a college football victory celebration” (United Press, “Ford Workers...” 6A). Rather than disbanding, the workers gathered at a nearby park until the agreement with Ford was finalized. As they waited, according to the reporter, “the strikers and watching crowd were entertained by a man who sang dustily [sic]:

‘If you want a royal trimmin’

‘Just join a company union—

‘Hinky-dinky parlez vous.’” (6A)

See: United Press. “Ford Workers in Kansas City All Return to Jobs Monday.” *Syracuse Herald* 4 April 1937: 1 and 6A. Web. *Newspaper Archive*. Web. 8 Dec. 2014.

⁶¹ Women working at Department 24 of the A.C. Spark Plug division GM in Flint used yet another version of “Mademoiselle from Armentières” during the strike to announce that they, too, were getting organized and were ready to help, although they were not on strike themselves. About half of the employees of A.C. Spark Plug were women (Fine 119). Their parody titled “The AC Girls” and ran in the *Flint Auto Worker* on February 10, 1937, in the same issue that announced that Department 24’s union membership had “jumped from less than 10% to over 80% in the past two weeks,” as AC workers were inspired by Fisher Body workers occupying their plants (5). [“The AC Girls.” *The Flint*

Auto Worker. 10 Feb. 1937: 7. Print. Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State U, Detroit, MI. 9 May 2014.] The Department 24 parody is as follows:

The A.C. girls work all day, parley-voo
The A.C. girls work all day, parley-voo
The A.C. girls work all day, with lots of
 grief and little pay
Hinky dinky parley-voo.

The A.C. girls are getting wise, parley-voo
The A.C. girls are getting wise, parley-voo
The A.C. girls are getting wise, for they're
 starting to organise [sic]
Hinky dinky parley-voo.

Will our bosses be surprised, parley-voo
Will our bosses be surprised, parley-voo
Will our bosses be surprised, when they
 find out we're unionized
Hinky dinky parley-voo.

The A.C. girls are going to fight, parley-voo
The A.C. girls are going to fight, parley-voo
The A.C. girls are going to fight, to help and
 win this doggone strike
Hinky dinky parley-voo. (7)

Despite the enthusiasm of this particular song, the women of A.C. Spark Plug were not among those who occupied their plant. Still, it is likely that more than one was a member of the women's Emergency Brigade, a contingent of the Woman's Auxiliary that responded to hostile strike situations. Members of the Emergency Brigade wore armbands and red berets—and carried clubs (Fine 119 and Dollinger and Dollinger 134-35).

⁶² In another version that Dana Frank has found, the Woolworth's workers mix a version of "Mademoiselle from Armentières" with another well-known protest song associated with the Flint sit-down strike, Maurice Sugar's "Sit-Down, Sit-Down." The Woolworth's version is as follows:

Sit down girls, sit down girls,
Parlez-vous.
Sit down girls, come sit down, don't be afraid to [stand your ground]?
Hinky-dinky parlz-vous. (qtd. in Frank 92)

⁶³ Frank provides a detailed and entertaining analysis of news coverage of this strike, including the coverage by *Life Magazine*. See pages 92-99, in particular.

⁶⁴ As Martin told the Pittsburgh *Courier*, “Negro workers have all the benefits and rights of our union. . . . We will go so far to protect them as we will white workers. We feel very, very strongly on this matter. We don’t segregate” (qtd. in Meier & Rudwick 35-6).

⁶⁵ The most notable of these new hires was Walter Hardin, a Pontiac employee as well as a former member of the IWW and the Auto Workers Union; an experienced organizer and persuasive public speaker, he soon took over Kirk’s position, and then served as a member of the Ford Organizing Campaign Committee. It is important to note that Martin’s choices of African-American organizers were not without political influence. Martin was careful to recruit employees who “who had either shed their Communist connections or never had any in the first place” (44), according to Meier and Rudwick. They contend that Martin’s Red-baiting, which later drove the union apart, inserted a wedge between the union’s left-leaning Unity Caucus and the union’s African-American organizers. As a result, when members of the Unity Caucus eventually took over the UAW, these organizers favored doing away with the systems for recruiting African-American workers that evolved under Martin’s leadership. As Meier and Rudwick write: “In short, the Negro organizational structure, once seen as a center of Communist influence in the union, had now come under the control of anti-Communists. As an agency dominated by Martin loyalists it would, in the following months, be subjected to attack from the Unity Caucus and ultimately destroyed” (47).

⁶⁶ As Meier and Rudwick write, “[F]or example, at the Dodge Motor Company over 75 percent of the whites but only 64 percent of the blacks were in the UAW; at Murray Body, nearly 80 percent of the whites but only 50 percent of the blacks; while at Bohn Aluminum, the figures were 95 percent and 50 percent respectively” (50).

⁶⁷ African-American workers, for example, were often segregated away from white workers into the lowest-paying, most difficult jobs (Meier & Rudwick 50).

⁶⁸ African-American workers also faced valid concerns over how contract negotiations could actually hurt their interests by locking them into low-paying jobs as white workers benefited from seniority protections (Meier & Rudwick 50-1).

⁶⁹ According to Lovestone’s biographer Ted Morgan, the idea of involving Lovestone in the UAW did not come from Lovestone himself, or even Homer Martin. Rather, David Dubinsky and Charles “Sasha” Zimmerman of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union, themselves anti-Communists, first enlisted Lovestone to serve as an advisor to Martin. Dubinsky later noted that Lovestone was paid \$100,000 for his services. Morgan describes Lovestone’s role as “Martin’s chief of staff, masterminding the strategy to rid the UAW of Reds” (125).

⁷⁰ For Martin's part, there may have been something to these accusations, according to conservative historian Harvey Klehr. Klehr claims that he has determined through examining minutes of Party meetings, that Communist activists in the UAW likely encouraged wildcat strikes among the workers. However, it seems clear that party officials chastised these individuals for breaking with UAW leaders as the Party pursued a unified "Popular Front" policy with non-Communist labor leaders (404-413). See: Klehr, Harvey. "American Communism and the United Auto Workers: New Evidence on an Old Controversy." *Labor History*. 24.3 (1983): 404-413. Taylor & Francis Journals Current Content. Web. 30 July 2014.

⁷¹ The actual number of fired organizers varies depending on which source is consulted. According to Kraus, the announcement was that Martin planned to dismiss "half of the UAW's two hundred organizers and staff members" (349). The actual number dismissed may have been smaller. For instance, an Oct. 3, 1937 editorial in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* states that Martin, "fired a dozen organizers and plans to fire others" (15). "On the Other Foot." Editorial. *Pittsburgh Press*. 3 Oct. 1937: 15. *Google News Archives*. Web. 21 July 2014.

⁷² Lovestone first found the letters missing after his Manhattan apartment was robbed on July 17, 1938; he, rightly as it turns out, blamed the Communist Party. Ted Morgan, Lovestone's biographer, has found that records in Moscow acknowledge that the CP had possession of Lovestone's papers; further, information collected by the FBI sheds light on how the break-in occurred. Building employees were unionized under what Morgan describes as "a small Communist-controlled union." A maid who had seen Lovestone's correspondence passed along information about the letters he had written. Party agents, in turn, rented two apartments in the building, presumably to keep an eye on Lovestone's activities. When the robbery ultimately occurred, burglars avoided being detected by simply skirting the stolen papers straight into one of the rented apartments, thus avoiding the doorman at the building's entrance (Morgan 129-30).

⁷³ For more on Homer Martin's antics and forced resignation, see Zieger, Robert H. *The CIO, 1935-1955*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1995: 99-100. Print., as well as a very detailed account in Kraus, Henry. *Heroes of Unwritten Story*, 311-408. See also articles from the *United Automobile Worker*. These include, but are not limited to: "UAW Board Calls Convention." *United Automobile Worker* 21 Jan. 1939: 1-2. Microfilm Reel: 1939-43; "Common Sense About Reds." *United Automobile Worker* 21 Jan. 1939: 2. Microfilm Reel: 1939-43; "Suspend Martin as Union Wrecker," *United Automobile Worker* 28 Jan. 1939: 1 and 3. Microfilm Reel: 1939-43; "New UAW Headquarters," *United Automobile Worker* 28 Jan. 1939: 1. Microfilm Reel: 1939-43.

⁷⁴ See, for instance: Marquart, Frank. *An Auto Worker's Journal: The UAW from Crusade to One-Party Union*. University Park: Pennsylvania State U P, 1975. 82-4. Print.

⁷⁵ The *OED* also speculates that Alice the Goon played a part in the etymology of the word.

⁷⁶ Others may have continued to appear, however, in newspapers published by individual UAW locals. Many such newspapers existed. However, these poems may never be recovered—all but a few, rare issues have been lost.

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