“We Are Sojourners for Our Rights”
_The Cold War, 1946–1956_

We are Sojourners for our rights—
Till We wake up the
Conscience of the Land...

ANTHEM OF THE SOJOURN FOR TRUTH AND JUSTICE,
WASHINGTON, D.C., 30 OCTOBER–1 NOVEMBER 1951;
QUOTED IN _THE WORKER_, 14 OCTOBER 1951

On 1 October 1951, sixty determined African American women stormed past bewildered guards at the doors of the Civil Rights Section of the Department of Justice in Washington. They had come to see the U.S. attorney general, J. Howard McGrath, to demand that the government end racial injustice and terror against African Americans. They were members of the Sojourners for Truth and Justice, a newly formed black left feminist organization led by the veteran radical Louise Thompson Patterson and the young poet and actor Beulah Richardson. Sojourners crowded into the office of Maceo Hubbard, a black Justice Department official. The New York tenants’ rights organizer Angie Dickerson forcefully conveyed the group’s sentiments: “Sir, we are here to speak our grievances. Our men are lynched, beaten, shot, deprived of jobs, and, on top of it all, forced to become part of a Jim Crow army and go thousands of miles [to] Korea to carry out war to other colored peoples.” Hubbard, who listened politely, said that he would pass the group’s grievances to Attorney General McGrath, but the delegation never received a meeting or a reply."
self-determination protected in the UN's human rights declarations. They advanced positions on race, class, and gender that were in many respects far ahead of the Communist Party, civil rights groups, and women's clubs. This work and their individual and collective identities informed one another, producing an oppositional consciousness steadfastly committed to radical, transformative change.

The Cold War also stands as a key turning point in black left feminism. Just as it was coming together ideologically and organizationally, black left feminism was largely crushed and sidetracked by Cold War repression that came to be known as McCarthyism, revealing the personal and political costs of anti-Communism on black left feminists.6 Facing relentless government persecution during the McCarthy period, state repression isolated some of the most committed black activists for a brief but crucial moment from the emergent civil rights movement and the global political stage. Their persecution also exposed postwar "anxiety concerning modern sexuality and female roles," as the historian Elaine Tyler May observes, prompting cold warriors to "call for the revitalization of domesticity" as a bulwark against Communism.7 Constructing womanhood as universally white, heterosexual, and middle class, postwar domesticity helped promote social conformity and silenced political dissent. In response, black left feminists employed "familialism," described by the historian Deborah A. Gerson as "a strategy that made use of the valorization of the family" to portray McCarthyism, not Communism "as the destroyer of family freedom, security, and happiness."9 This strategy stood in stark contrast to the transgressive gender politics they often practiced prior to the early 1950s, highlighting the creative—and often ironic—ways black Communist women defied the red scare by subverting dominant gender discourses. On the one hand, they suffered under anti-Communist persecution; on the other hand, McCarthyism and decolonization inspired them to think in new ways, to search for new allies at home and abroad, and to build a "black women's international."

Local and global events during the Cold War provided the background against which black left feminists formulated new approaches to fighting for black freedom across the diaspora and for the rights and dignity of black women globally. In the years immediately after World War II, for instance, black radicals and liberals found common ground by calling for human rights and by supporting NAACP initiatives of charging the United States before the UN with violating African Americans' human rights. But black lib-
From its opening convention in 1951 to its demise less than two years later, the Sojourners defied the Cold War political order. The first and only group during the entire Old Left period explicitly organized "to fight for full freedom of the Negro people and the dignity of Negro womanhood," the Sojourners sought to mobilize black women against Jim Crow, U.S. Cold War domestic and foreign policy, and colonialism. It demanded freedom for the unjustly sentenced, such as Rosa Lee Ingram, a forty-year-old Georgia sharecropper and widowed mother of fourteen, who along with two of her sons faced death for killing in self-defense a white would-be rapist in 1947. Sojourners called for the freedom of W. Alphæus Hunton, the leader of the Council on African Affairs (CAA) who had been jailed for his left-wing affiliations. It insisted that the U.S. government stop persecuting those who spoke out against racism, colonialism, and the Cold War. These included W. E. B. Du Bois, charged in 1951 as an "agent of a foreign principle in the United States," Paul Robeson, whose passport the Justice Department had confiscated in 1950, and Claudia Jones, who had been arrested in 1951 for allegedly violating the Smith Act of 1940. Like the left-wing Civil Rights Congress (CRC), the Sojourners embraced the causes of human rights, black equality, peace, and international solidarity. The repressive Cold War atmosphere, however, together with the Communist Party’s ambivalence toward the group, contributed to the Sojourners’ untimely demise.

The Sojourners provides a lens for critically understanding broader trends in black left feminism during the Cold War. These years signaled the best and worst of times for black women radicals. The culmination of decades of struggle by black women radicals, their work during the red scare marked the highest stage of black left feminist praxis during the entire Old Left period. Informed increasingly by a burgeoning Third Worldist and, to varying degrees, prophetic black Christian sensibility, black left feminists formulated their most sophisticated articulations to date of black women’s “triple oppression.” Directly confronting Cold War policy, black left feminists posited black women across the diaspora as the vanguard center of global radical change. Although they rarely employed the idiom of human rights to describe their work, black left feminists viewed white supremacy, the subjugation of black womanhood, lynching, and black poverty as forms of genocide. These practices, along with political persecution and colonialism, represented a violation of universal, inalienable human freedoms, such as “the right to life,” freedom of conscience, and the right of
erals soon retreated because these initiatives, the historian Carol Anderson notes, became "synonymous with the Kremlin and the Soviet-led subversion of American democracy" during the McCarthy period. Black liberal protest groups, such as the NAACP and Mary McLeod Bethune's National Council of Negro Women, began distancing themselves from Communists, adopting what Mary Dudziak has called "Cold War civil rights," a liberal, anti-Communist politics committed to supporting U.S. Cold War domestic and foreign policy with the hope of securing racial reform in return. Barring Communists from its membership in 1950, the NAACP dropped its support for taking Jim Crow before the UN and adopted an anti-Communist, anti-colonialist line. Similarly, the National Council of Negro Women distanced itself from Communists, removing demands for human rights from its constitution and disaffiliating itself from the left-wing Congress of American Women, which shut down in 1950 due to anti-Communist repression.

The speed with which anti-Communism transformed the postwar U.S. political landscape caught black women radicals and their comrades by surprise. Immediately after the war, the Truman administration pursued a policy of containment against the Soviet Union, a former wartime ally. Domestically, the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 rolled back New Deal labor rights, imposing loyalty oaths on unions and government employees. The contentious presidential campaign of 1948 witnessed the decisive defeat of the Progressive Party candidate Henry Wallace, who staunchly supported the New Deal, civil rights, and peaceful coexistence with the Soviet Union. Enthusiastically backed by Communists, his defeat was a serious blow to Party morale, opening the door for more virulent attacks against labor and radicals. Fearing association with Communism, the CIO expelled eleven of its unions with Communist ties in 1949 and 1950.

In response to the emerging Cold War and to Soviet directives, American Communist leadership in July 1945 reconstituted the CPUSA under the leadership of the veteran Communist William Z. Foster. Jettisoning the Popular Front, Party leadership moved toward the "ultra-left." Communists once again called for socialism and world revolution, waging an internal campaign against what Communists pejoratively called "Browderism." McCarthyism pushed the CPUSA further toward the left. In June 1951, the Supreme Court upheld the convictions of eleven Communist Party leaders ("the CP-11") arrested in 1948 for violating the Smith Act. Soon afterward, authorities indicted "second-string" Party officials under the Smith Act. For
Party leaders, the “Smith Act trials” confirmed that the United States had reached “five minutes to midnight” and that the nation was on the precipice of fascism and war. Convinced that the CPUSA would be outlawed, it created an underground leadership structure that made the Party even more sectarian, secretive, and vulnerable to McCarthyite attacks.¹⁴

These developments had major implications for the CPUSA’s position on the Negro Question. Resurrecting the Black Belt thesis, the Party now framed Jim Crow and black suffering as forms of genocide. Inspired by this position, Communists launched internal campaigns against white chauvinism, which, together with campaigns against Browderism, proved divisive.¹⁵ The postwar years also saw major shifts on the Woman Question. While it received less attention than the Negro Question, the CPUSA officially endorsed a position on gender oppression that for the first time acknowledged the non-economic roots of “male supremacy.”¹⁶ In particular, Communists asserted that postwar domesticity resembled the “notion of the ‘fascist triple K’ (Kinder, Küche, Kirche—children, kitchen, church).”¹⁷

Black Left Feminist Organizing, 1947–50

Black left feminists did not let growing anti-Communist repression quell their radical sensibility nor did they allow the move toward the ultra-left of the CPUSA’s leadership prevent them from building black Popular Front movements for human rights and the defense of black womanhood. Indeed, black women radicals were at the forefront, for instance, in building mass movements in defense of black men such as Willie McGee, a Mississippi truck driver sentenced to death in 1945 after his white female lover falsely accused him of rape, and the Trenton Six, a group of men sentenced to death in 1948 for allegedly killing a white shopkeeper in Trenton, New Jersey.¹⁸ As the head of the Harlem branch of the Civil Rights Congress, Audley Moore organized demonstrations in support of McGee. Additionally, Esther Cooper Jackson, who relocated from Birmingham to Detroit in 1947 after the CPUSA reassigned her husband to the Motor City, spoke as the organizational secretary of the Civil Rights Congress of Michigan in support of the Trenton Six.¹⁹

Black women radicals also took part in organizing mass support for Paul Robeson, who became perhaps the most prominent black spokesperson for human rights victimized by red baiting. White cold warriors and black liberals alike assailed him as a “Communist” and as “un-American” for allegedly commenting at the World Peace Conference in Paris in April 1949.
that African Americans would never fight in an anti-Soviet war. In response to this condemnation, the CRC sponsored an open air concert on 4 September 1949 near Peekskill, New York, for Robeson to defend his right to be heard. The event turned violent. White, anti-Communist vigilantes attacked concert goers as they returned home. Robeson’s critics blamed him for this violence, further contributing to his status as a political pariah among anti-Communists. Following the concert, the Council on African Affairs, which Robeson chaired, sponsored a national publicity campaign to defend him. As the CAA’s director of organization, Louise Thompson Patterson organized his tour. Despite opposition from local authorities, thousands of people came to hear him speak in cities across the country. Esther Cooper Jackson addressed a rally in Detroit, while Claudia Jones spoke out in his defense. Mass support for Robeson showed that he remained beloved within black communities due in no small part to black women radicals, who collaborated and understood that defending him was critical to protecting civil liberties for all African Americans.

The Rosa Lee Ingram case represented the most important site of black women radicals’ organizing during the late 1940s. While the CPUSA publicized the case, it was black progressive women who took the lead in freeing Ingram. Practically forgotten today, the Ingram case, like other initiatives of the black Left, “exposed southern Jim Crow regimes to national and international scrutiny, helping to weaken and isolate them on the eve of the southern civil rights movement,” argues the historian Martha Biondi. In March 1949, National Committee to Free the Ingram Family was formed in Harlem and affiliated with the CRC. Led by the veteran Communist Maude White Katz, as well as Mary Church Terrell, the founder of the National Association of Colored Women, Ada B. Jackson, an official of the Congress of American Women, and the future Sojourners Claudia Jones, Shirley Graham Du Bois, and Eslanda Robeson, the committee framed Ingram’s plight as a violation of human rights in familialist terms.

In her research on the anti-war group Women Strike for Peace, which operated during the Cold War era, Amy Swedlow views the use of motherhood as a non-feminist basis for making political claims. However, the Ingram campaign illustrates how black women radicals used familialism as a basis for advancing a feminist agenda and contesting Cold War politics. Describing Ingram as “an innocent Negro mother,” the committee called attention to her plight as a “widow, sharecropper, and mother . . . [who] de-
fended her honor, virtue, and home” from a white male rapist. For Ingram's supporters, her case represented the interlocking systems of oppression suffered by black women: the rape of black women, the lack of protection for black motherhood, the economic exploitation of black women, whites' refusal of conferring the honorific title of "Mrs." to married black women, and the disfranchisement of black women in the Jim Crow South. Moreover, the case stood as a violation of human rights. “The United States,” the committee charged, “[could] intervene for human rights.” But instead of freeing her, the United States chose “to pardon hundreds of Nazis [sic] criminals responsible for” the Holocaust. In the spring of 1949, the committee sent to President Truman ten thousand Mother's Day cards and a petition with twenty-five thousand signatories demanding Ingram's freedom. In the coming years, the committee and its successor, the Women’s Committee for Equal Justice (WCEJ), repeatedly took Ingram's case to the UN. However, in an imperial move U.S. diplomats blocked the UN from discussing the case. This did not deter Ingram's supporters. Anticipating tactics typically associated with the civil rights movement, the WCEJ held interracial women’s prayer vigils for Ingram's freedom on the steps of the Georgia statehouse and sent interracial women’s delegations to see her in her Georgia prison cell. In response to ongoing domestic and international pressure, Georgia officials eventually released Ingram and her two sons in 1959. Her freedom clearly showed how black women radicals found some success in challenging Cold War politics as the civil rights movement gained momentum.

Ending the Neglect of Black Women: Black Left Literary Feminism

As black women radicals organized mass movements for human rights in the years immediately after the war, they also expressed their concerns in writing. The Cold War witnessed the most prolific moment of black left feminist writing during the entire Old Left period. Linking racial justice, economic equality, peace, international solidarity, the protection of civil liberties, and decolonization to black women's concerns, these works often framed human rights claims in familialist terms. This move illustrated how the Cold War forced black left feminists to downplay their image as strong, independent women. Despite its contradictions and gaps, black left literary feminism prefigured conclusions drawn by black feminists of the 1970s; it thus represents a link between black women's writings from the early twentieth century and the late twentieth century.
No person was more instrumental to shaping these discussions than Claudia Jones. In the postwar years, she emerged as the most prominent black woman in the Communist Left and as a leading theoretician on the Negro Question and the Woman Question. A close ally of William Z. Foster, she was elected in 1945 to the CPUSA’s National Committee, making her the only black woman to sit on its executive board. An enthusiastic supporter of the Congress of American Women, she also headed the Communist Party’s National Negro Commission and National Women’s Commission, both re-established immediately after the war. It was through her journalism, however, that Jones made her greatest impact on Communist positions on race, gender, and class.30

Jones’s essay, “An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!” published in 1949 in the CPUSA’s theoretical journal, Political Affairs, stands as her most significant achievement as an activist while living in the United States.31 Carole Boyce Davies observes that it was crucial “in advancing the issues of black women in the CPUSA and thereby informing the party’s position on gender and the ‘triple oppression’ logic that would later characterize its ideological orientation.”32 Years ahead of its times, the essay evidenced Jones’s creative use of Marxism-Leninism for advancing her theory of black women’s superexploitation and her “amazing ability to link disparate struggles.”33 She wrote it partially in response to “Woman against Myth,” an article written by the white progressive Betty Millard in 1948 that portrayed women as universally white and oppressed.34 Jones also penned the essay under intense political repression. In 1948, authorities arrested her for violating the Immigration Act of 1918 and threatened to deport her due to her affiliation with the CPUSA. It was this concern with growing red scare repression, together with her optimism in postwar black militancy and Third World independence movements, that explains the article’s urgent tone.35

Key to the article was Jones’s innovative discussion of black women’s triple oppression. She argued: “Negro women as workers, as Negroes, and as women—are the most oppressed stratum of the whole population.” Identifying black women’s low wages and social status as domestics as the “highest manifestation of capitalist exploitation,” she tied black women’s oppression to the genocidal conditions in which black communities lived.36 She appreciated how the capitalist process exploited black women as mothers and as the breadwinners in segregated, impoverished black communities. Taken together, these issues proved her larger point: “The super-exploitation of
the Negro woman worker is thus revealed not only in that she receives, as woman, less than equal pay for equal work with men, but in that the majority of Negro women get less than half the pay of white women.” While black women were victimized, she did not view them as victims. Instead, it was precisely their location at these interstices of multiple oppressions that explained their militancy historically. These conclusions soundly rejected Millard’s portrayal of women as universally white and oppressed, illustrating how Jones understood how race, class, and gender both positioned black and white women differently in relation to one another and placed black women at the vanguard of social change.

In the most controversial section of “An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!” Jones railed against white Communists, in particular women, for their “white chauvinism.” She excoriated white Communist women for hiring and exploiting black women domestics and criticized white Communists who opposed interracial marriage. For these reasons, she argued, “a developing consciousness on the woman question today, therefore, must not fail to recognize that the Negro question in the United States is prior to, and not equal to, the woman question. For the progressive women’s movement, the Negro woman, who combines in her status the worker, the Negro, and the woman is the vital link to this heightened consciousness.” Black women’s freedom, she argued, was essential to overthrowing capitalism, racism, and sexism. For the women’s movement to succeed, white Communist women needed to reject their racial and class privilege and promote black women as leaders. In addition, black Communist men, she stressed, had “a special responsibility . . . [in] rooting out attitudes of male supremacy.” Here she was calling, in effect, for a progressive black masculinity. Like other black left feminists, she believed that black male radicals had an ethical obligation to challenge sexism. While black Communist women had leveled many of these charges since the 1930s, “An End to the Neglect to the Problems of the Negro Woman!” marked the first time that these grievances were so systematically theorized and aired so publicly within the CPUSA. In response to these charges, some white Communist women accused her of “reverse chauvinism” and ostracized her, demonstrating how even this ranking Party leader could find herself an outsider within the CPUSA.

One of the most innovative aspects of the piece was Jones’s attempt to theorize on black women’s multiple oppressions from slavery to the present.
Prefiguring conclusions drawn in Angela Davis's important essay of 1971, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," Jones emphasized that black women's status within enslaved communities stemmed both from how West African societies afforded women with a higher degree of status than their European counterparts, and how enslavement created a degree of egalitarianism between black women and men. Like Davis, Jones identified black women as important leaders in the enslaved community and in resistance. White masters recognized black women's militancy, using "legalized rape" to break enslaved women's will and to terrorize the entire enslaved community. Here, Jones appreciated the connections between the rape of black women, racial oppression, and capitalist exploitation, a key point in Davis's essay. Jones also briefly mentioned how emancipation transformed black gender relations, underscoring how she understood gender as socially constructed and historically contingent. Arguing that abolition ushered in a new mode of production characterized by the destruction of communal-based housing and survival strategies in favor of small-scale, black farming, these economic shifts placed "the Negro man in a position of authority in relation to his family." For these reasons, some black men adopted hegemonic masculinity. These conclusions, on one level, bore the stamp of classic Marxist-Leninist thinking on the Woman Question, stressing the importance of class relations in shaping women's status. Yet her arguments also reveal her attempt to advance a more innovative approach, acknowledging the importance of male chauvinism and the family as detriments to black women's well-being.

For Jones, no issue better highlighted black women's triply oppressed status "under American bourgeois democracy moving to fascism and war" than the case of Rosa Lee Ingram. She praised "Mrs. Ingram" as a "courageous, militant Negro mother" exploited by the capitalist order and unjustly imprisoned by a Jim Crow court for defending herself from a white rapist. Echoing conclusions drawn decades earlier by anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Jones asserted that Ingram's case exposed the "hypocritical alibi of the lynchers of Negro manhood who have historically hidden behind the skirts of white women when they try to cover up their foul crimes with the 'chivalry' of protecting 'white womanhood.'" Moreover, the case, she argued, invalidated U.S. criticisms of Soviet human rights abuses and exposed the "hypocrisy" of the United States as the leader of the "free world" before a global audience. Convinced that winning Ingram's freedom would
directly challenge U.S. imperialism, she believed black women and the CPUSA would play a key role in leading global struggles for peace, democracy, and women’s equality.

Jones’s ideas were not developed in a vacuum. Her argument strikingly resembled Louise Thompson’s essay of 1936, “Toward a Brighter Dawn,” as well as writings by Esther Cooper, Marvel Cooke, and Ella Baker. Jones did not cite these works. But she later acknowledged that her ideas were part of a “rich heritage of struggle” linked to the activism of black Communist women of the 1920s, such as Grace Campbell and Williana Burroughs, and militant nineteenth-century women reformers like Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Susan B. Anthony, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Jones’s acknowledgment of her debt to these women, in particular to black Communist women, is significant. She was consciously aware of how her journalism was part of a longer history of black women’s radicalism.

The essay, however, is not without its contradictions. It tends to portray black women as a class and as uniformly progressive. The essay also illustrates the ironies of black left feminists’ invocation of familialism, particularly in its discussion of the Ingram case. On the one hand, her appropriation of the “cultural icon of family security” subverted Cold War logic by positing that “the state violat[ed] its own values by attacking families,” notes Deborah Gerson. On the other hand, familialism reinforced prevailing assumptions about black women’s “natural” roles as mothers and as wives, precluding more critical interrogations of gender and sexuality that might have directly challenged the heteronormative logic undergirding Cold War ideology.

Her use of familialism helps explain Jones’s silence on sexuality. In light of how the “ politicization of homosexuality was crucial to the consolidation of the Cold War consensus,” writes the cultural scholar Robert Corber, familialism countered a prevailing demonization of Communists as sexual deviants threatening national security. Yet familialism precluded open discussions within the Communist Party about sexuality, reproductive rights, and domestic violence. It is important to note that black left feminism of the Cold War era was neither categorically heterosexist nor completely silent on matters of sexuality. The prescient, pro-gay rights arguments in anonymous letters by the progressive journalist, political activist, and lesbian Lorraine Hansberry that were published in the late 1950s in issues of The Ladder, the newsletter of the first U.S. national lesbian organization, the Daughters of Bilitis, best evidence this claim. However, these conversations did not be-
come an explicit part of the black feminist agenda until the 1970s. So while
Jones's understandings of the relations between race, gender, and class were
ahead of their time, most black left feminists during the McCarthy period
had little to say openly about sexuality and its relation to politics, revealing
how the stifling Cold War atmosphere narrowed the range of black left femi-
nist discussions.32

Despite its shortcomings, "An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the
Negro Woman!" profoundly influenced the CPUSA's thinking on race, gen-
der, and class. Following its publication, articles about triply exploited Afri-
can American women regularly appeared in party periodicals. From 1948
trough 1953, Jones's weekly column, "Half of the World," published on the
Woman Today page in the Sunday edition of the Daily Worker, extended
arguments made in "An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro
Woman!"33 She produced this work under intense political persecution.
Following her arrest in 1948, authorities arrested her two years later for violat-
ing the Internal Security Act of 1950 (McCarran Act), which authorized the
deporation of the foreign-born who were deemed as "subversive." In 1951,
she was arrested for violating the Smith Act. Authorities jailed her for nine
months in 1955 before deporting her to Great Britain later that same year,
with her health suffering immeasurably. That the state used her writings as
evidence in its deportation case against her underscores how cold warriors
viewed black left literary feminism as subversive.34

No other literary work besides "An End to the Neglect of the Problems of
the Negro Woman!" had more of an influence on black left feminism during
the Cold War than Beulah Richardson's powerful poem of 1951, "A Black
Woman Speaks of White Womanhood, of White Supremacy, of Peace."
Like Jones's writings, the poem placed special emphasis on the social con-
sequences of being a black woman in a historically violent, racist, sexist so-
ciety and understood black women as key agents for human rights and world
peace. Although not her original intention, the poem was critical to inspir-
ing the formation of the Sojourners for Truth and Justice.

A dynamic actor and poet, Richardson (who later became known as the
Hollywood motion picture star Beah Richards) was born in 1925 in Vicks-
burg, Mississippi. The daughter of a minister and a schoolteacher, she eventu-
ally made her way to Los Angeles to escape Jim Crow. There, she moved
toward the left after befriending Paul Robeson, Louise Thompson Patterson,
and William L. Patterson. Richardson's interest in the Willie McGee case was
critical to her radicalization. The Civil Rights Congress, led by Patterson, organized a worldwide amnesty campaign on McGee’s behalf, denouncing his execution on 8 May 1951. After listening to his widow, Rosalie McGee, condemn his unjust death at a CRC-sponsored rally in Los Angeles, Richardson penned the poem.55

“A Black Woman Speaks of White Womanhood, of White Supremacy, of Peace” understands how African American women’s disfranchisement, historically linked with prevailing negative images of black womanhood, provide a unique standpoint from which to critique American social inequalities and from which to make political demands for rights, dignity, and respect. In the poem’s electrifying opening, Richardson claims:

It is right that I a woman
black,
should speak of white womanhood, My fathers,
my brothers,
my husbands, my sons
die for it—because of it.
Their blood chilled in electric chairs,
stopped by hangman’s noose, cooked by lynch mob’s fire,
spilled by white supremacist mad desire to kill for profit
gives me that right.

She then connects the lynching of black men with the rape, disfranchisement, and economic exploitation of black women from slavery to the contemporary moment. For Richardson, prevailing cultural representations of black women as unchaste, unattractive, and servile were key in perpetuating black women’s marginality and instilling a sense of racial superiority in white women. Moreover, the poem links the rape of enslaved black women with Cold War era “rape frame-up” cases against Willie McGee and the Martinsville Seven, a group of black men in Martinsville, Virginia, executed in 1951 for allegedly raping a white woman, as heinous examples of state-sanctioned genocide against African Americans.56

Like Jones, Richardson rejected “woman” as a universal, ahistorical category by focusing on black women’s location as domestics and as mothers. However, the poem went one step further than Jones with its outspoken condemnation of white women’s complicity in black women’s sexual exploitation, asserting that the former’s sense of white privilege had histori-
cally prevented them from defending black women’s bodies from white men and from acknowledging consensual sexual affairs with black men accused of raping white women. Richardson, like Ida B. Wells-Barnett, broke the silence about the interracial rape of black women and used it to galvanize African American communities into action for promoting social justice and black rape survivors’ emotional healing. The poem challenged a tendency within the African American collective memory that has understood the lynching of black men, not the “institutionalized rape of black women[,] . . . as a powerful symbol of black oppression,” notes the literary scholar Hazel Carby. In doing so, Richardson posits that reclaiming black women’s bodies and beauty constituted key sites of resistance. Evoking the plights of Rosalie McGee and Rosa Lee Ingram, the poem ends by calling on white women to reject white supremacy and to join black women in fighting for global peace and racial equality.

The poem became a smash hit in the Communist Left during the summer of 1951, impressing Thompson Patterson and sparking the beginning of their lifelong friendship, as well as the initial idea for forming an all-black radical women’s group. Later that summer, Richardson moved to New York to pursue an acting career. There, she and Thompson Patterson wrote "A Call to Negro Women," the Sojourners’ founding manifesto and summons to its inaugural meeting in Washington, D.C., the Sojourn for Truth and Justice.

The Sojourners for Truth and Justice

While black women radicals pursued their local and transnational agendas in left-wing sites, such as the Progressive Party, the Congress of American Women, Paul Robeson’s Freedom newspaper, the Council on African Affairs, the Civil Rights Congress, the National Negro Labor Council, and the National Committee to Free the Ingram Family, no organization was more important to black left feminism than the Sojourners for Truth and Justice. It marked something new in the history of diasporic feminism, black radicalism, U.S. women’s movements, and American Communism because it provided black women radicals a unique opportunity to lead their own organization. Inspired by the writings of Claudia Jones and Beulah Richardson, as well as by postwar U.S. black movements and global decolonization, the Sojourners combined black nationalist and Popular Front organizational strategies with Communist positions on race, class, and gender, advancing a human rights agenda and a vanguard center political approach. The group
fostered collective identities and an oppositional consciousness. Prefiguring the Third World Women’s Alliance and the Combahee River Collective, the Sojourners forged a “black women’s international.” Given this, the Sojourners challenges the historian Amy Swedlow’s conclusions that the Congress of American Women “more than any other feminist organization before or since . . . made racial equality a central plank in its program and incorporated African American women in its leadership.”

The Sojourners stands as Thompson Patterson’s most significant achievement as an activist. As much as the group owed its inspiration to “A Black Woman Speaks,” black women’s status as outsiders within the Communist Left also inspired its formation. Thompson Patterson later recalled, “In the Sojourners, we were trying to develop something that would get away from blacks being tokens in the left movement.” She added, “[Black] women need at times to talk with each other, that we get tired of being the one or two [black women] to be shown off and to say that we have a mixed organization.”

In keeping with the Popular Front, the leadership of the Sojourners included Communist and non-Communist black women, such as the veteran activists Louise Thompson Patterson, Dorothy Huntion, Shirley Graham Du Bois, and Eslanda Robeson, all of whom were members of the CAA executive board, the CRC, and, with the exception of Robeson, the CPUSA. Charlotte Bass, the septuagenarian publisher of the California Eagle and the vice-presidential candidate on the Progressive Party ticket in 1952, sat on the Sojourners board. While neither Bass nor the younger leadership, such as Richardson, Frances Williams of Los Angeles, and Alice Childress of New York, were members of the Communist Party, they were actively involved in the Progressive Party and worked closely with known Communists. In addition, the Initiating Committee included Rosalie McGee, Bessie Mitchell, a sister of one of the Trenton Six defendants, Amy Mallard, whose husband was lynched in Georgia, and Josephine Grayson, the wife of one of the Martinsville Seven. These women gave credence to how Cold War repression and racial terror victimized black women and children. However, there is no record indicating that the Sojourners had invited Mary McLeod Bethune and other former, wartime, black liberal female allies to join the group. Given the NAACP’s and the NCNW’s ban on working with Communists, black women radicals were now largely on their own. Times had changed.
As the group's acting secretary, Richardson announced "A Call to Negro Women" in September 1951. Notes Carole Boyce Davies, the manifesto stands as a landmark in twentieth-century U.S. black feminisms, U.S. women's movements, and transnational feminisms for its ability to speak to a "range of issues . . . that extend[ed] far beyond the narrow gendered formulations that appeared later in mainstream feminist movements" of the 1970s. Combining Popular Front, familialist, and prophetic black Christian language, the "Call" condemned Jim Crow, lynching, the rape of black women, police brutality, black poverty, political persecution of black radicals, and the imprisonment of Rosa Lee Ingram, revealing the continued concern her case generated among black progressive women. In an uncharacteristic break from Communist secularity, the "Call" stated, "We . . . will no longer in sight of God . . . sit by and watch our lives destroyed by unreasonable and unreasoning hate that metes out to us every kind of death it is possible for a human being to die." This statement evidenced the group's effort to appeal to churchgoing black women whose ideas about social justice were informed by prophetic black Christianity. At the same time, this stance shows how the political climate of the Cold War required the Sojourners to mute its secular politics in order to reach a wide audience.

Additionally, the Sojourners stepped directly into Cold War politics. Charging that Jim Crow was the Achilles heel of the United States in its claims as leader of the "free world," the group called for the Korean War's end. Urging black women "to dry [their] tears, and in the spirit of Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth, arise," the "Call" summoned black women to Washington to "demand of the President, the Justice Department, the State Department, and the Congress absolute, immediate, and unconditional redress of grievances." Identifying with the early black women's club movement, as well as the revered Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman as symbols of their own political struggles, the Sojourners sought to portray its black left feminist program as both fundamentally American and as part of a tradition of black women's militancy.

The Sojourners held its inaugural convention in Washington, D.C., from 29 September through 1 October 1951 at the meeting hall of the Cafeteria Workers Union, a left-leaning, CIO-affiliated union composed disproportionately of black women, illustrating the group's efforts to fight for black working-class women's rights. As conference delegates disembarked from their trains at Union Station and headed for the conference, they gleefully
sang the new group's anthem. The gathering made for an impressive affair: 132 women from 15 states answered "A Call," including members of the Initiating Committee and Angie Dickerson, the journalists Halois Robinson and Lorraine Hansberry, both of whom covered the convention for Freedom, and Mary Church Terrell, whose presence surely bolstered the women's hopes of building a movement in the tradition of early black women's clubs. Claudia Jones did not attend the conference. A court order barred her from traveling outside of New York. But she praised the group in her "Half of the World" column as "one of the most heartening developments of the Negro liberation movement."  

Following the convention, the Sojourners pressed forward with its black left feminist human rights agenda. Several leading Sojourners signed the We Charge Genocide petition, delivered to the UN in late 1951 by William L. Patterson on behalf of the Civil Rights Congress. Comparing the contemporary wave of white racial terror in the United States to the Holocaust, the petition charged the United States with genocide and demanded that the UN intervene to protect African Americans' human rights. In early 1952, the Sojourners publicized the murder of the Florida NAACP leader Harry Moore and his wife Harriet, who died when assailants threw dynamite through the Moores' bedroom window on Christmas morning 1951. The assailants were never brought to justice. In a publicly released statement, "Our Cup Runneth Over," which took its title from biblical scripture, Sojourners expressed their outrage that this heinous act occurred on Christmas. Like the Ingram case, the statement focused on Harriet Moore's death as an example of the daily violent assaults against black womanhood in the United States and globally. In response, Sojourners called for five thousand black women to participate in a "March on Washington." Instructing marchers to come veiled, Sojourners framed the demonstration as "a day for mourning for the death of Harriet Moore," calling on President Truman "to stop genocide of Negro people and to guarantee civil liberties to all Americans." The Sojourners never staged the protest. The challenge of organizing a major demonstration in such a repressive political moment may explain why it was not held. But the proposed demonstration illustrated the group's intentions of using direct action, familialist symbols, and prophetic black Christian discourse to publicize Harriet Moore's death and to build support for the group's human rights agenda.  

On 23 March 1952 the Sojourners held its Eastern Seaboard Conference
in the Harlem YWCA, marking the group’s only major gathering following its Washington convention.75 Echoing Jones’s writings, Thompson Patterson exclaimed in an impassioned speech that the Sojourners could build “the greatest organization in the history of our people because, triply oppressed as we are, we can lead the fight for our people’s freedom.”76 One report declared that “Negro women, as women, as Negroes, and as workers are the most oppressed group of the whole population of the United States.”77 Following the gathering, the Sojourners drafted a constitution and formed chapters in Cleveland; Baltimore; Detroit; Philadelphia; Washington, D.C.; Los Angeles; Chicago; San Francisco; Richmond; Hartford; Louisville; and Rocky Mount, North Carolina.78

The Sojourners also looked to the global stage to advance its black left feminist agenda. In contrast to the NAACP’s and the NCNW’s anti-Communist internationalism, the Sojourners sought to take the lead “in the liberation struggle of our people and the fight for peace and freedom in

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the nation and in the world." Following the lead of the National Committee for the Defense of the Ingram Family, the Sojourners internationalized the Ingram case. The Sojourners, together with the left-wing Emma Lazarus Federation of Jewish Women's Clubs, based in New York, issued a joint statement in June 1952 to the Fifteenth International Conference on Public Education in Geneva, cosponsored by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The statement urged the gathering to pass a resolution in support of Ingram's freedom, asserting that "guaranteeing the civil liberties of Negro women is basic to full educational equality for all women." The statement resembled conclusions drawn by Jones and Richardson that white women's liberation was inseparable from black women's freedom. Moreover, the groups' collaboration illustrates how the Sojourners enabled black left feminists for the first time to set the terms of political discussion with white women radicals. Because the Sojourners was an independent organization, its members did not have to answer to anyone but themselves, and they had their own organization behind them providing institutional support for their local and transnational work.

The group's efforts to forge ties with South African female anti-apartheid activists best highlights the group's transnational, feminist, human rights agenda and its collective, militant, diasporic consciousness. African American interest in apartheid, especially among the black Left, increased in early 1952 on the eve of the Campaign of Defiance of Unjust Laws, better known as the Defiance Campaign. Cosponsored by the African National Congress and the South African Indian Congress, the campaign organized massive civil disobedience against the racist government's repression of non-white South Africans' human rights from 6 April 1952, the tercentennial of the first Dutch settlement in South Africa, through early 1953. Black South African women figured prominently in these mass actions, which in some cases led to their imprisonment.

The Sojourners approved an anti-apartheid resolution written by the CAA, described by the historian Francis Njubi Nesbitt as the "first anti-apartheid organization in the United States," at the former's Eastern Seaboard Conference. Highlighting the cross-fertilization of ideas between the groups, the resolution declared that "the struggle of black women in America for freedom and justice is unthinkable as many hundreds of millions of their sisters in the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia are degraded and enslaved by the same pattern of racist oppression which we strive to abol-
ish in our own land," and the resolution lauded women's leadership in "this campaign for human rights in South Africa." Sojourners recognized the relationship between their domestic human rights claims and those of South African women, thereby unveiling the ways in which racist systems of control, while having nuanced formations, operated similarly across geographic boundaries with devastating effects for all people of color.

In accordance with the resolution, the Sojourners sent President Truman and the UN South African delegation letters condemning apartheid. Joined in a CAA-sponsored demonstration in front of the South African consulate in Manhattan, and corresponded with black, white, and Indian women trade unionists, Communists, and anti-apartheid activists. In letters to them, Charlotta Bass and Louise Thompson Patterson wrote that African American women's freedom was "inextricably linked" to the status of women in South Africa, as well as across Africa. Prefiguring conclusions drawn two decades later by the Third World Women's Alliance and the Combahee River Collective, Bass and Thompson Patterson emphasized that freedom movements led by "colored women in Africa, Asia, and in these United States must lead to the complete emancipation of women throughout the world." Bertha Mkhize, the ANC Women's League official, warmly answered the group's letter by thanking its members for having "made it possible the link [between African American and African women] we have always wished for [on] this side of the world." By corresponding with militant South African women activists, the Sojourners accomplished one of its main objectives: forging transnational links with Third World women.

As groundbreaking as the black transnational, feminist, left-wing work of the Sojourners was for its time, the group's familialist framings of black women's freedom and its tendency to view black women monolithically limited its program. On one level, this constituted a useful strategy for imagining political solidarities among a disparate group of women of color from around the world whose social locations were shaped by a shared history of and daily encounters with racism, patriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism. On the other hand, it did not take into account what Chandra Talpade Mohanty later observed—that "systems of racial, class, and gender domination do not have identical effects on women in Third World contexts." In ignoring such complexities, the Sojourners overlooked the very real ways in which race, class, sexuality, and colonialism positioned women of color differently vis-à-vis one another and in relation to their (colonial) nation-state.
Unity Luncheon, Sojourners for Truth and Justice and Emma Lazarus Federation of Jewish Women's Clubs, 23 March 1952, New York. Louise Thompson Patterson (speaking and standing at table). Sitting at right of Thompson Patterson are Dorothy Hunton, Charlotta Bass, Claudia Jones, and Angie Dickerson. Source: American Jewish Archives.

Members of the Sojourners for Truth and Justice with Paul Robeson, San Francisco, 22 May 1952. Black women radicals were some of the embattled Paul Robeson's most vocal supporters. Source: Louise Thompson Patterson Papers, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.
Women of color's divergent political and social locations in this specific historical moment posed serious challenges for bringing Third World women together.  

An appreciation of social location and of how systems of domination operated in more relational, historically specific terms may have helped the Sojourners formulate a theoretical approach better able to capture both the commonalities and, more important, the particularities of Third World women's lives and their daily, oppositional struggles as potential grounds for forging international solidarities among women of color.  

Similarly, the group's celebration of black motherhood and the legacies of Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, and the early black women's clubs tended to reinforce prevailing assumptions about women's "natural roles," thereby precluding more critical discussions of gender, sexuality, femininity, masculinity, and respectability. Given this, the group's program was silent on birth control and reproductive rights, marking a break from the vocal support of left-wing women of the 1930s, including Louise Thompson, for these issues.  

The postwar Communist Left's conservative stance on sexuality, together with Cold War domesticity, certainly helps explain the silence of the Sojourners on these issues.  

Calling for reproductive rights would have made the Sojourners even more vulnerable to government repression. While black women radicals had often openly embraced sexually transgressive politics and practices from the 1920s through the 1940s, the Cold War now required them to frame their political demands in more traditional gendered terms. In doing so, black women radicals were unable to completely transcend the middle-class respectability espoused by their mainstream counterparts.

The social composition of the Sojourners also prevented it from building a broad-based, left-wing, black transnational women's organization. Despite its efforts to recruit working-class women by supporting initiatives beneficial to laboring women and often articulating its program in prophetic black Christian terms, members of the Sojourners were mostly urban, middle-class, secular, well-educated women with a radical, leftist, feminist politics. They were second-class citizens in their own country; but in comparison to black women in general overseas (and in the United States), they were relatively privileged. With links to the secular Communist Party, Sojourners surely would have seemed alien to most black working-class women accustomed to supporting protest movements led by charismatic male ministers. These challenges confronting Sojourners resembled those faced by black left feminists since the 1920s. While they were often able to galvanize
black women into action around a variety of issues, black women radicals were less successful in recruiting black women into the Communist Left. Despite its limitations, at the very moment at which many Communist male leaders—black and white—retreated in response to ever increasing government repression, Sojourners went on the offensive. Like their predecessors in the early club women’s movement, Sojourners understood that no one else but themselves would fight for black women’s freedom. But Communist short-sightedness and McCarthyism soon dashed the group’s aspirations of building a new, militant movement of black women.

The Political and Personal Costs of Anti-Communism

At the same time as black women radicals penned their most cutting-edge journalism and built the Sojourners, they suffered tremendously under Cold War repression. With the exception of Claudia Jones’s deportation, scholars have largely overlooked the impact of McCarthyism and the CPUSA’s internecine fighting during the 1950s on black women radicals.91 Black left feminists’ persecution highlights the political and personal costs of anti-Communism on black women, the gendered contours of Cold War repression against black radicals, and the ambiguities of employing familialism as a strategy of resistance against McCarthyism, as well as the breaks in black left feminism and the postwar black freedom movement.

The demise of the Sojourners provides an example of the destructive impact of anti-Communism and Communist sectarianism on black left feminism during the early 1950s. Despite an auspicious start, the Sojourners never became a mass, transnational organization. The group counted no more than a few hundred members, most of whom lived in New York. The NAACP’s bar on Communists prevented Sojourners from participating in local civil rights campaigns led by Ella Baker, the president of the New York NAACP chapter. By the end of 1952 the Sojourners had stopped functioning.92

The equivocal relationship the Sojourners had with the Communist Party factored into its demise. Tension between the groups ironically occurred at the moment when the CPUSA had reemphasized “Negro liberation.” Despite this stance, the Party neither officially endorsed the Sojourners nor provided the group with the same degree of support that it gave to the Congress of American Women or to black left groups such as the Council on African Affairs or the Civil Rights Congress.93 Multiple factors explain the
CPUSA's ambivalence toward the Sojourners. Party officials had never before dealt with an all-black, leftist women's group. In addition, the Sojourners became entangled in an internal CPUSA conflict. According to the historian Linn Shapiro, Claudia Jones hoped that the Sojourners could advance her struggle with CPUSA officials over black women's place in the socialist struggle. Jones's involvement in the Sojourners alarmed Party officials, who feared losing one of the Party's most visible black female leaders to what some viewed as a rival organization.94

The CPUSA's unease with the Sojourners allegedly led to a confrontation between Jones, Thompson Patterson, and Richardson. Thompson Patterson remembered decades later that Jones approached her and Richardson to convey Party leaders' discomfort with the Sojourners. Whatever Jones said sparked a physical confrontation with Richardson. "I had to pull Beulah off Claudia," Thompson Patterson recalled.95 If this incident occurred, it contradicts Jones's enthusiastic public support for the organization, complicating her legacy as an outspoken black feminist and suggesting that her loyalty to the CPUSA prompted her to undercut the Sojourners. This altercation speaks to larger tensions between black left feminists. Despite their status as outsiders within the CPUSA and their radical politics, they neither always got along nor shared the same ideological outlook.

The acrimony surrounding the Sojourners prompted Thompson Patterson to rethink the Party's ability to address black women's issues. Despite her frustration with its ambivalence toward the Sojourners, she chose to remain in the CPUSA. Her marriage to a ranking Party leader surely made it difficult for her to split from it. She must have considered that breaking from the Party certainly would have been interpreted by cold warriors as a renunciation of her husband. Whatever the reason she elected to stay, her frustration with it proved again that even in the avowedly racially egalitarian Communist Left, black women radicals had to fight continually for a voice within it.96

While the CPUSA's cool response to the Sojourners contributed to its demise, McCarthyism was the key factor in shutting down the organization. From the very beginning of Sojourners, the Justice Department kept close tabs on its every move. Government informants riddled the group, enabling the FBI to accumulate more than 450 pages of surveillance files in little more than one year. Convinced that the Sojourners were a "Communist Front," files detailed the group's supposed "Communist Influence and Participation"
and "Subversive Ramifications." Additionally, the group's efforts to internationalize the Ingram case only verified its "subversive" intentions to officials.

At the same time as authorities targeted the organization, they also harassed individual Sojourners. The Justice Department seized Charlotte Bass's passport in April 1951. In the same month, Louise Thompson Patterson testified in New York State court about her twenty-year involvement in the International Workers Order. In 1953, Joseph McCarthy summoned Eslanda Robeson and Shirley Graham Du Bois to testify before his Senate Special Investigations Committee. Unlike Jones, these women were neither jailed nor convicted. But this repressive political climate surely scared away potential supporters.

Ultimately, the demise of the Sojourners underscores the underappreciated political costs of the "Global Cold War" on black diasporic feminism. The historian Gerald Horne observes that the "Cold War attack was worldwide, with [Communist] parties and progressives [across] the world under siege simultaneously." Nowhere was this more evident than in the United States and South Africa. Both nations' rulers understood black struggles as a "Communist plot." At the same time as U.S. cold warriors targeted the Sojourners, the South African government brutally suppressed the Defiance Campaign. Cold War repressions, therefore, not only suppressed militant black women's activism within each respective nation but also severed organizational ties of international solidarity between black women on both sides of the Atlantic. It would not be until the formation of the Third World Women's Alliance fifteen years later that another women of color protest group in the United States formulated an explicitly left-wing, transnational feminist program like that of the Sojourners.

As cold warriors targeted the Sojourners, authorities also harassed black women radicals and their families. No one's plight better exemplified this than Esther Cooper Jackson. Like other black leftists, she found herself increasingly on the defensive as the Cold War intensified. This was especially true for black progressives in the postwar South. The red scare and resurgent white supremacy crushed the southern Popular Front. In Birmingham, local CIO leadership, following directives from its national offices, expelled CPUSA-affiliated unions and suspected Communists. The city saw the Ku Klux Klan's resurgence. Birmingham authorities outlawed the CPUSA and intimidated civil rights militants. This repressive political climate forced

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the Southern Negro Youth Congress to shut down in 1949, removing a pion-
eering black militant organization with international connections and pro-
gressive gender politics from the political scene.107

It was Cooper Jackson’s marriage to a leading black Communist that
prompted the state to persecute her. On 20 June 1951, authorities indicted
James E. Jackson Jr. along with eleven other “second string” Communists
Party leaders for violating the Smith Act.108 (The couple had moved the
previous summer from Detroit to New York after the CPU SA had assigned Jack-
son to its national office and appointed him as its southern regional direc-
tor.) Neither Jackson nor his comrades advocated the violent overthrow of
the U.S. government. But it was the height of the red scare. In a preempt-
tive move, Jackson went underground to avoid arrest. Placed on the FBI
most wanted list, he remained in hiding for the next four and one-half years
during which time he had absolutely no contact with his family. Authori-
ties never arrested Cooper Jackson nor summoned her to testify before a
congressional committee. Nor did they confiscate her passport. Instead,
FBI agents determined to ascertain Jackson’s whereabouts. They vigilantly
surveilled and harassed the Jackson family for nearly five years due to the
government’s belief that the Jacksons, like other Communist families,
represented an international Communist conspiracy that threatened national
security and the American way of life.109 Agents watched Cooper Jackson’s
home in the black Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn and those
of her family and friends around the clock. In one of the government’s most
aggressive moves against the Jackson family, the FBI coerced four-year-old
Kathryn Jackson’s nursery school into expelling her. These experiences evi-
denced how Cooper Jackson and other “Smith Act wives” often bore the
brunt of government repression and the burdens of raising children and
making a living while their husbands were in hiding or in jail.110 Additionally,
her FBI file during these years reflected authorities’ obsession with cap-
turing her “fugitive” husband and surveilling her. In a move anticipating
COINTELPRO surveillance of black militants in the 1960s, the FBI compiled
hundreds of pages of reports detailing her daily activities, biographical his-
tory, and political work.111

The long separation and their reunion placed serious strains on their chil-
dren and marriage. For nearly five years, the Jackson daughters grew up
without their father. Cooper Jackson was alone. After James Jackson’s re-
turn, she claimed, “It wasn’t easy to get readjusted again as a family. We had

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Why Hasn't the FBI Found the Florida Bomb Murderers?

The FBI ordered the Welfare Department to throw little Kelley Jackson (left) out of nursery school. Her father, Jackson, would have let it go if his wife, the family's head of household. Then uncovered protests of other parents whose children were snuck away from her. She was back in nursery school.

Mrs. Jackson's husband, Dr. James Jackson, a Negro leader of the Communist Party, refused to submit to FBI warrant under Section 3 of the Smith Act. Asked by Supreme Court Justice Black to, "...unconstitutional on its face and as applied," Dr. Jackson has said he is fighting against fascism, for equal rights. His family is persecuted. ...issue who makes progress and seeks social changes goes through...

END THIS FBI PERSECUTION. JOIN THE WOMEN'S DELEGATION TO THE JUSTICE DEPARTMENT—FEDERAL BUILDING, FOLEY SQUARE, NEW YORK, THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 21st, 11:00 A.M.

1. Write the Justice Department—Demand the FBI and persecution of the Jacksons.
2. Write President Truman—Demand FBI arrest the Florida bomb murderers of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Mason.
3. Join the national campaign to repeal the Smith Act.

Source: Brooklyn Eagle, January 1952.

Brooklyn Civil Rights Congress flyer, 1952. Credit: Esther Cooper Jackson.

a lot of serious talking to do to decide whether [maintaining the marriage] was worth it or not." Despite these hardships, she persevered. Jackson's absence made her more independent. She raised their children and was the breadwinner, working a variety of jobs, including as a staff person in the office of the New York Urban League. Moreover, her memories of growing up in the Jim Crow South as well as support from family and friends helped her to withstand government repression. She also found support through the Families of Smith Act Victims (Families Committee), an organization composed largely of wives of CPUSA officials indicted under the Smith Act. In an effort to publicize Jackson's plight and those of other Smith Act victims, she worked with the Families Committee, the Civil Rights Congress, the Sojourners, and the National Committee to Defend Negro Leadership.

The small community of black Communist families in Brooklyn was crucial to helping the Jacksons weather McCarthyism. Cooper Jackson's old SNYC comrades Dorothy and Louis Burnham and Ed and Augusta Strong
had relocated from Birmingham to Brooklyn by the late 1940s. Cooper Jackson and her daughters eventually moved into the Strong's home. The Burnhams lived across the street. Many neighbors were sympathetic to the Jacksons' plight. Louise Thompson Patterson and William Patterson lived nearby in Brooklyn before they moved to Harlem. Sallye and Ben Davis from Birmingham visited New York every summer. All of these couples had young children who regularly played together and could relate to one another's ordeal. Ed Strong, along with his sister-in-law, Constance Jackson, who had stayed with the family, went underground. Phyllis Taylor-Strong, Ed and Augusta Strong's eldest daughter, remembers FBI cars parked on the street near their home and witnessing her mother burning letters in the kitchen oven out of fear that government agents might raid their home and seize documents. These traumatic experiences had long-term effects on her ability to trust new acquaintances.115

Dorothy and Louis Burnham's second eldest child, Margaret Burnham, remembers being "just terrified" of constant government surveillance, especially after Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, a Communist couple convicted of spying for the Soviets, were executed in June 1953. Their deaths were especially traumatic for many children of Communists.116 Still, these black children of Communist parents understood that they "weren't alone," as Margaret Burnham recalled. She added, "It was frightening. But you knew that somehow you were fighting against something." Although their parents rarely spoke about politics with their children, children of Black Communist parents regularly attended left-wing political events with their parents and attended Party-affiliated summer camps where they interacted with other "Smith Act children." Their parents did everything they could to ensure that their children enjoyed a typical childhood, like playing hopscotch and attending birthday parties.117 Growing up under these difficult circumstances created lasting bonds between them. Many found personal and professional success as adults, proving "that to the degree that the families of the Smith Act victims had support and could achieve a sense of community and connections to others, the children of these families would experience less negative effects of trauma," writes Kathryn Alice Jackson, the Jacksons' second daughter.118

Sensing a more hospitable political climate, Jackson surrendered to federal authorities in New York on 2 December 1955. Ironically, he turned himself in the day after the launching of the Montgomery bus boycott. Earlier
that same year, the Afro-Asian Conference convened in Bandung, Indonesia, establishing what later became known as the Non-Aligned Movement. As these events unfolded, Jackson, who had organized bus boycotts in Birmingham during World War II and had known E. D. Nixon, the leader of the Montgomery bus boycott, languished in a New York federal jail, while Cooper Jackson, who had led the Southern Negro Youth Congress and traveled internationally, now concentrated her efforts on freeing her husband. Jackson's year-long trial began in May 1956. He was found guilty and sentenced to two years in prison. The case, however, was thrown out on appeal and helped set the precedent for the Supreme Court's ruling in 1957 in *Yates v. United States* that in essence declared the Smith Act unconstitutional. But his victory was in some ways a pyrrhic one. In the coming years, civil rights organizations feared associations with Communists. Given the level of anti-Communist hysteria and state repression, some of the most committed anti-racist fighters found themselves isolated for a brief but key moment from the emergent civil rights movement and the world stage.

Just as the red scare necessitated that other black left feminists express their claims for social justice in familialist terms, Cooper Jackson articulated her politics in the rhetoric of postwar domesticity. One example of this was her decision to adopt Jackson as her last name. Strategically, adopting her husband's name made it easier for her to be readily identified publicly as James Jackson's wife when she spoke on his behalf. But it also signaled how McCarthyism required her to conform to social norms that wives share their husbands' last names, shedding the transgressive practice of black women who used their maiden names during the 1940s, a practice that cold warriors read as subversive.

Cooper Jackson's 1953 agitprop pamphlet *This Is My Husband: Fighter for His People, Political Refugee* best illustrated her use of familial ideology for making claims for social justice through valorization of black motherhood. Portraying the government's efforts to capture Jackson as a fascist-like attack against a respectable, unprotected black family, a devoted mother and wife, and the entire African American community, she called attention to how government agents harassed her children. Evoking memories of slavery, she compared the infamous Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 to the "fascist-like" Smith Act and referred to FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover as "the present master of the FBI bloodhounds" in search of Jackson. In addition to demanding the freedom of her husband and all Smith Act victims, she called in essence for "

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a human rights program: protection of civil liberties, labor rights, peace, and democracy. She expressed, above all, her desire to be reunited with Jackson and support for what he believed.123

Given the sensitivity within black communities to the long history of violent breakup of black families, along with recent memories of Nazism, her story circulated widely in the black and Communist press. The most notable story was James L. Hicks's front-page exposé, "Fugitive Red's Family Plagued by FBI Agents," published in February 1952 in the Afro-American. The article assailed the FBI for using "Gestapo-like tactics" in harassing the Jacksons.124

This Is My Husband provides another example of the ambiguities of familialism. In the pamphlet Cooper Jackson conceded ground to the Cold War order by using the discourse of postwar domesticity to demand her husband's freedom. In doing so, the pamphlet prevented Cooper Jackson from formulating an alternative gender discourse that might have helped destabilize postwar domesticity. Her objective, however, was to publicize her family's and husband's persecution during one of the most politically repressive moments in U.S. history, not to theorize on women's oppression. As a black woman radical living through the McCarthy period whose husband was on the FBI's most wanted list, she had limited political options. In this light, her deployment of familialism can be read as a political performance, one that enabled her to appropriate dominant gender discourses to generate publicity for her plight and her husband's case. So while employing familialism removed critical discussions of sexuality from the table, it also subverted postwar domesticity and McCarthyism, enabling Cooper Jackson to criticize the government, to demand social justice, and to maintain her revolutionary convictions.125

The red scare also affected Thyra Edwards's life. Anti-Communism may have been a contributing factor in her decision to move in 1948 to Italy with her white Jewish husband. She left the United States as the Congress of American Women buckled under anti-Communist repression. As the CAW's executive director, she surely must have been nervous about being persecuted, but she was never arrested. In 1953, she returned to the United States, gravely ill, for medical attention. She died soon after that.126

Audley Moore's response to Cold War repression and CPUSA political shifts sharply contrasted from Edwards's and Cooper Jackson's. In 1950, Moore resigned from the CPUSA. As discussed in chapter 4, her frustrations with its racism, sectarianism, and sexism triggered her ideological conver-
sion into a strident black nationalist who was now fully self-aware of alleged Communist duplicity. Her conversion story is key to Moore’s narrative about her postwar ideological transformation. However, few scholars have critically interrogated these testimonies. I contend that her story stands as another example of how she reinvented her past, which in this case downplayed the importance of the red scare in contributing to her split from the CPUSA.

The Cold War directly affected Moore’s life. The red scare decimated the black Popular Front in New York, which activists like her had helped put together. Her long-time associate, the Harlem U.S. representative Adam Clayton Powell, publicly broke from the Communist Left in 1948 out of fear that links to Communists would jeopardize his political career. Red baiters destroyed the political career of Moore’s close ally, Benjamin Davis Jr. Fearing widespread black support for the black Communist Harlem councilperson, cold warriors moved against him. One of the defendants in the CP-11 trial, Davis was convicted and sentenced to five years in jail in October 1949. With his political reputation tarnished, Davis lost his reelection bid in November. Moore served as his campaign manager. One month later, red baiters in the city council purged him from office on the grounds that he was a Communist, significantly weakening Communist influence in Harlem. For Moore, Davis’s rapid political demise and Powell’s break from the Communist Party must have been alarming. Additionally, the NCNW, an organization in which she had been actively involved during World War II, had moved toward the right. She was also briefly involved in the Sojourners. A savvy activist, she surely recognized that the CPUSA’s heyday was coming to an end and a political realignment in the African American community was under way.

Martha Biondi argues that “the anticomunist purge in the New York labor movement undermined the dynamic Black-labor-left nexus at the heart of the city’s civil rights movement.” These developments destroyed Moore’s own union, the progressive National Maritime Union (NMU), which was based in New York. Authorities viewed it as a Communist front. In 1948, they jailed the union’s secretary, the Jamaican-born Communist Ferdinand Smith for allegedly violating the Smith Act. In 1951, he was deported. His persecution prompted conservative forces within the NMU to expel Smith and other suspected militants of color from the union. With his deportation and the NMU’s collapse, “the base from which had emerged a Black proletar-
ian intelligentsia that had served African Americans so well over the years, had been eroded into dust," notes Gerald Horne. The NMU's demise deprived Moore of a site to carry out her work and to earn a living. For her, the union's demise surely was another clear indication that the Communist Left was in decline.

Unlike Ferdinand Smith and Claudia Jones, Audley Moore was neither arrested nor jailed for her Communist affiliations during the McCarthy period. But, like other black left feminists, she underwent intensified FBI surveillance. She did not comment on how government repression may or may not have affected her affiliations with the NMU and the CPUSA. But what is certain is that FBI surveillance frightened her and targeted many of her close associates and organizations to which she belonged. In light of the ferocity of anti-Communist repression and Party sectarianism, she may have concluded that she would have become isolated from her Harlem grass-roots constituents, who were for the most part not Communist rank-and-file members. Disgruntled with sexism, racism, and sectarianism within the Party and neither a hardcore Marxist-Leninist ideologue nor a member of the CPUSA's national leadership like Claudia Jones, Moore may have decided that she had more to lose than to gain by staying in the Party at this repressive political moment. Plus, unlike Louise Thompson Patterson and Esther Cooper Jackson, Moore was not married to a Party leader, affording her with independence to follow her own political path. While she had once seen the Communist Party as the vanguard for black liberation, she now looked to Africa as the harbinger for progressive change. Moore broke from the Party altogether, as did others, to avoid jail or having their careers ruined by the "red" label. Still, leaving the Party was not easy for Moore. Even in 1978, her resignation elicited painful memories: "It wasn't by choice, it broke my heart, because I felt that [the CPUSA] was a vehicle to us to freedom." By leaving the CPUSA, she severed political and social ties that extended back to the 1930s. Her resignation constituted a major blow to the Harlem Communist Party from which it arguably never fully recovered. To be sure, her departure deprived the CPUSA of an organic, proletarian intellectual and one of its most able leaders in Harlem.

Typically, studies of American Communism identify Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" in March 1956 and the Soviet invasion of Hungary in November 1956 as marking the end of the CPUSA as a viable social movement and as a major turning point in American radicalism.
Fewer scholars have paid attention to how the mid-1950s marked a turning point in black women’s radicalism. The McCarthy period signaled the end of an era for black left feminism. Black women who had joined the CPUSA during the 1930s and had gained international reputations as leading spokespersons in struggles for civil rights, racial justice, peace, decolonization, women’s rights, and democracy experienced severe government repression and witnessed the destruction of Communist-affiliated organizations with links to global movements. The personal and political costs of anti-Communism on black women radicals should not be underestimated. The red scare crushed the Sojourners. Authorities jailed and deported Claudia Jones. Esther Cooper Jackson and Louise Thompson Patterson focused much of their work on defending themselves and their families from cold warriors. Audley Moore bolted from the CPUSA, due in part to her fear of being persecuted. McCarthyism, in one way or another, briefly isolated them from the emergent civil rights movement and from the global political scene. Yet ironically, it was political repression, together with the CPUSA’s leadership’s turn toward the ultra-left and global decolonization, that helped inspire black women radicals to carry out their most advanced work to date. Their theorizing on black women’s triple oppression was years ahead of its time. Advancing a human rights agenda, they identified black women across the diaspora as the global vanguard for transformative change. Their work was not without contradictions, as evidenced in their appropriation of the postwar discourse of domesticity to make claims for social justice. Still, they maintained their revolutionary convictions in the face of virulent state repression. It was this resilient passion for social justice that inspired them to search for new sites of struggle as the Cold War thawed.