LOVE AND ACTIVISM: JAMES AND ESTHER COOPER JACKSON AND THE
BLACK FREEDOM MOVEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES, 1914-1968

by

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This political biography of James and Esther Cooper Jackson illustrates that the United States’ diplomatic relationship with the Soviet Union shaped the way activists approached the twentieth century Black freedom movement precisely because this relationship also shaped their personal lives. A Black Communist couple, James and Esther Cooper Jackson’s experiences offer a way of understanding how individuals developed, adapted, and understood their own politics and participated in multiple movements as the Cold War shaped U.S. political discourse. The dissolution of the U.S.-Soviet World War II alliance led many leftwing activists to step back from the political spotlight, but others, like the Jacksons, believed in the urgency of the Black freedom movement and continued to act in ways that drew on their Communist background and personal convictions. The start of the Cold War inaugurated a period of trial and error for leftist Black activists, as the methods they had used before and during World War II no longer reflected the political climate in the United States. My work offers insight into the relationship between the Communist Party, USA (CPUSA) and the civil rights
movement, the CPUSA’s progression on the subjects of race and gender, and the life of a couple whose love sustained their activism, and whose activism nourished their relationship. Following the Jacksons’ lives throughout the Black freedom movement demonstrates that while the Cold War restricted more radical forms of activism in the United States, dedicated leftists continued to challenge conventional thinking and remained engaged in civil rights struggles. The Jacksons’ lives reveal that anticommunism influenced the direction and methods of the civil rights movement, but did not prevent Communists from contributing to the broad ideological struggle against racial injustice in the United States.
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INTRODUCTION

In November 1974, nearly one thousand Communists, Black activists, and leftist thinkers and artists gathered at the newly built Hilton hotel in New York City to celebrate the sixtieth birthday of Black Communist leader James E. Jackson, Jr. Folksinger Pete Seeger performed and told stories of his travels through the South in the 1940s. South Carolina civil rights activist Modjeska Simkins gave a speech in which she reflected on her experiences with Jackson when they were both active in the Southern Negro Youth Congress. Attorney Mary Kaufman, one of the youngest lawyers to prosecute in the Nuremberg trials and who worked on cases defending Communists in the 1950s, spoke, as did Communist Party U.S.A. chairman Gus Hall. On the stage was a floor-to-ceiling portrait of Jackson by the noted Communist artist Hugo Gellert, made especially for the occasion. The gathering was a who’s who of twentieth century leftist activism, with attendees from different organizations, political backgrounds, and generations.

At the event, Jackson gave a speech reflecting on his sixty years. He talked about two things: love and activism. His family and his cause were the defining features in his life. In 1974, he embraced his forty-four year membership in the CPUSA and declared, “For if I am anything, I am a man of the Party.” But the Party was not all he was. He was a devoted father, grandfather, husband, and son who had dedicated his life to the Black freedom movement. He thanked his parents for “their contributions to the cause of our peoples’ emancipation from poverty, illiteracy, disenfranchisement and discrimination over the span of a full lifetime.” Jackson also paid tribute to his wife. He said:
On this very public occasion, I want to express a deep private appreciation—of love and esteem—for my wife Esther, who has been so important a part of all of my endeavors during the past third of a century; and, if some of those efforts have proven meaningful and of value, no small credit is due to Esther for her comradeship and help, patience and endurance. Of course, she does a much more important work than merely being my wife; she is a…confidant of scores of writers and opinion-makers in broad areas of Afro-American literature, culture and thought.  

As a couple, the Jacksons shared a commitment to their love for each other and their activism. They strove for racial equality and justice, pressed the United States government to live up to its democratic ideals, and worked to create coalitions among people who fought for change. The couple’s activism was an expression of their commitment to each other and their desire to create a better world for their children.

This political biography of James and Esther Cooper Jackson illustrates that the United States’ diplomatic relationship with the Soviet Union during World War II and the Cold War shaped the way radicals approached the twentieth century Black Freedom Movement precisely because this relationship also shaped their personal lives. A Black Communist couple, James and Esther Cooper Jackson offer a way of understanding how individuals developed, adapted, and understood their own politics and participated in multiple movements first during the Great Depression and World War two and then as the Cold War reshaped political discourse. Using the lives of two individuals as a lens offers insight into how political institutions shaped the lives of activists, and how activists mobilized their own lives to change institutions.

James Jackson and Esther Cooper’s families instilled in them a political consciousness and provided the possibility for upward mobility. Each partner carried forward the political principles of their childhoods, particularly concern for the

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1 Jackson speech at 60th Birthday Celebration, Papers of James and Esther Cooper Jackson, Box 1 Folder 1, Tamiment Library, New York University, New York, NY.
politically, socially, and economically disenfranchised, and fused them with Communism. The couple married in 1941 and strove for an egalitarian household, which influenced their public activism in the Southern Negro Youth Congress, a Popular Front organization dedicated to racial and economic justice in the South. In 1951, James Jackson was indicted under the Smith Act and disappeared into the CPUSA’s underground, where he commented on the Party’s role in the emerging civil rights movement. In response to her husband’s disappearance, Esther Cooper Jackson defended her children and fought on behalf of her husband. She also pointed to the FBI’s assault on her family and disregard for white violence against African Americans as contrary to U.S. democratic ideals in the Cold War. After his reemergence and trial, Jackson sought to revive the besieged CPUSA by making civil rights its primary issue as editor of the CPUSA’s *The Worker*. In 1961, Esther Cooper Jackson founded and edited *Freedomways Magazine*, which provided a media forum for the civil rights, Black Power, Black Arts, and global freedom movements. *Freedomways* covered these movements for twenty-five years, offering unique analysis on national and global issues, and its internal operations reflected the editorial board’s ideas about race, gender, and politics in the United States.

The Jacksons’ lives shed light on the relationship between the Communist Party, USA and the civil rights movement, the CPUSA’s progression on the subjects of race and gender, and the life of a couple whose love sustained their activism, and whose activism nourished their relationship. Following the Jacksons’ lives throughout the Black freedom movement demonstrates that while the Cold War restricted more radical forms of activism in the United States, dedicated leftists continued to challenge conventional
thinking and remained engaged in civil rights struggles. The Jacksons’ lives reveal that anticommunism influenced the direction and methods of the civil rights movement, but did not prevent Communists from contributing to the broad ideological struggle against racial injustice in the United States.

This study of the Jacksons’ lives advances scholarly understanding of the Cold War’s influence on progressive African American social movements and the individuals who were instrumental in advocating social change. In recent years, historians have begun to examine the impact of the Cold War on the Civil Rights Movement. While a liberal civil rights mobilization saw great success in the mid-1950s and 1960s, scholars like Patricia Sullivan, Robin Kelley, Robert Rogers Korstad, Nelson Lichtenstein, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, and Glenda Gilmore have argued that the civil rights movement has its roots in a radical Southern activist tradition dating back to the New Deal era, and earlier.\(^2\) This emerging field of inquiry has emphasized the American Popular Front as a point of origin in the civil rights movement, and acknowledged the start of the Cold War as the silencing force for Black radicals.

Following this theme, other scholars have used the Cold War as a way to understand the successes of liberal civil rights activists. Mary Dudziak, Carol Anderson, Penny Von Eschen, and others suggest that Cold War anticommunism led to civil rights advancements in part because the Soviet Union threatened to gain influence by critiquing

racial injustice in the United States.\(^3\) Although Southern anticommunists and conservatives made little note of the vast differences between liberal organizations and Communists, the changing political and diplomatic backdrop drove the CPUSA and its sympathizers underground. On the other hand, the same setting provided the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and other organizations with the opportunity for new triumphs.

These areas of scholarship raise new questions about the transition from Popular Front mobilization to civil rights and the political evolution of the activists who weathered these changes and continued to participate. This political biography of James and Esther Cooper Jackson begins to answer these new questions. It offers a way of understanding how and why individual activists changed their methods, refocused their energy, and contributed to shifts in larger social movements. The dissolution of the U.S.-Soviet wartime alliance led many leftwing activists to step back from the political spotlight, but others, like the Jacksons, believed in the urgency of the Black freedom movement and continued to act in ways that drew on their Communist background and personal convictions. The start of the Cold War inaugurated a period of trial and error for leftist Black activists, as the methods they had used before and during World War II no longer reflected the political climate in the United States. As a biography of a couple, my dissertation serves as a unique format for connecting political ideology, activist

movements, and individuals’ lives by using personal history as a reflection of and catalyst for political change.

The link between love and activism provides a useful framework for considering gender, family dynamics, and personal life as important components of social movements. The Jacksons crafted a radical, gender egalitarian marriage in which Esther Cooper Jackson’s activism never took a backseat to her husband’s career and ambition. Focusing on political philosophy within a marriage, my work provides a picture of gender ideology in practice, and links that theme to the Black freedom movement and the Cold War. I explore the Jacksons’ ideas about gender in relation to their careers and family to understand Communist Party gender ideals and the couple’s participation in civil rights organizations.

My work also looks critically at the normative nuclear family model that became a diplomatic tool in the Cold War by emphasizing race and activism as key factors in understanding family life. The couple’s work was intertwined for much of their life together, and many of the obstacles James Jackson confronted as a Communist Party leader led his wife to act in his defense and to protect her daughters. But her activism on behalf of her husband and family was part of a broader leftist political struggle, not simply an expression of her adherence to a particular gendered expectation. Cooper Jackson’s activism as a wife and mother offers a counterpoint to the idealized image of Cold War domestic life. Her work points to racism and anticommunism as forces aimed at the destruction of family and as a factor in the changing Black Freedom Movement.4

James Jackson also fully supported his wife’s independent activism and aspirations. He respected her ambition, intellect, and activist goals, and believed that “to be a good Communist you struggled on the woman question.”\textsuperscript{5} In this respect, Jackson used his Communist principles as guiding factors in his life. He embraced Communist ideals to understand gender, race, class, region, and nation, and he mobilized those ideals to help the CPUSA make tangible change in the United States. Believing that Communist ideals had relevance for everyday life, he tried to help the CPUSA move beyond dogmatic approaches to social problems.

As a biography of two individuals, this work is not an in-depth study of Communist Party policy or doctrine. James Jackson’s role in and relationship to the Party was complex, as was Esther Cooper Jackson’s, and my goal in exploring that relationship is to understand how and why the couple made particular choices, embraced certain goals, and abided by and deviated from the Party line. The couple embraced their connections to the Party, the Black freedom movement, their family, the nation, race, gender, and region, and all of those forces informed their activism. James and Esther Cooper Jackson gave priority to their family, and a component of that was fusing Communism and the Black freedom movement to make the world a more equitable place for their daughters. In doing this, the couple not only used the Communist Party and civil rights organizations to create change, they also mobilized social, political, and diplomatic

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contexts to shape the Party and civil rights organizations. Exploring the couple’s relationship with the Party and the Black freedom movement provides a way of understanding the relationship between individuals, organizations, and states, and helps to explain shifts in social movements and political discourse.

Studying James and Esther Cooper Jackson’s experiences as Black Communists also offers insight into how and why individuals arrive at particular political beliefs. The Jacksons were rational, compassionate, intelligent people. They loved their family and each other, and believed in the fundamentals of American democracy. James Jackson served in the Army in World War II, and each partner expressed outward patriotism even during times of political strife. This biography explores how two such individuals came to embrace a political philosophy that was vilified by the U.S. government and feared by the American people for over half a century. In the process, this work humanizes people who believed that Communism was a correct solution to the United States’ social, political, and economic ills by explaining the reasons behind their choices and the circumstances that informed their beliefs. It also offers context for understanding the way the Party and the Black freedom movement functioned and overlapped in the lives of members and participants.

James and Esther Cooper Jackson came of age with an understanding that opportunities came differently for Black and white, male and female, rich and poor. In the South, Jim Crow further stratified opportunity, and even the Black middle and upper classes found themselves in a lower social category than whites of a similar class background. When the Depression hit in 1929, struggling people across the nation began to question capitalism’s validity, and Communist Party membership grew. But in many
places, Communist ideology did not come from an intellectual or philosophical tradition. In her biography of Alabama Communist Hosea Hudson, Nell Painter writes, “Jim Crow and hard times had created a radical black constituency in Alabama of men…who did not find political sufficiency in church or lodge.” As the historian Robin D.G. Kelley has argued, poor and working people in Alabama embodied a radicalism that grew out of their economic and racial exploitation, and their ideals matched Communist ideology. In other areas, the CPUSA found itself adapting to a local context, meeting the needs and desires of people who demanded particular types of change.

The Jacksons fused their political sensitivity to inequality with their intellectual backgrounds. They were part of a growing trend among Depression-era college students who got involved in leftist organizations and joined the Communist Party as a result of connections they made in college. But for a couple who not only identified with their classmates, but with poor, disfranchised, and segregated African Americans, the CPUSA had meaning that was deeper than an ideological and philosophical political affiliation. The Jacksons’ exposure to poverty and racial segregation sparked their political awareness, and in many ways, their embrace of Communism was organic. A unique fusion of experiences – growing up in segregated southern communities, witnessing racialized poverty, being raised by parents who were involved in activist organizations, and having the opportunity to attend college during a time of vast economic despair – made Communism a reasonable choice for the Jacksons.

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7 Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*.
But joining the Communist Party did not mean that the CPUSA was always their top priority. Becoming members near the rise of the Popular Front era allowed the couple to explore the relationship between Party politics and grassroots social movements that were independent of national political organizations. Both partners led the Southern Negro Youth Congress and committed themselves to promoting the cause of Black freedom first. Though Communist Party politics influenced the SNYC, the organization’s leaders never allowed the Party’s priorities to supercede the needs of local communities, organizations, and individuals. The SNYC worked hard to approach Black southerners with an array of ideas about social movements, and in addition to offering support for unionization efforts and promoting leftist ideas, the organization also offered support to more conservative Southern activists. On the cover of the organization’s third conference program, a picture of Booker T. Washington reminded Black southerners that leaders with a wide range of ideas about progress and justice made contributions to the cause of Black freedom. In this respect, James and Esther Cooper Jackson’s early Communism fused political ideology with the pragmatic needs and goals of Black southerners.

The relationship of CPUSA and the Black freedom movement has a complex and contested history. A number of Cold War era histories argue that African American Communists were the product of manipulation and deceit on the part of the Communist International. They suggest that the Party promoted a position on the “Negro Question”

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opportunistically to win Black support, and that its position was “a function of immediate program rather than its cause.” A number of individuals who embraced this position were themselves Black ex-Communists, and they reacted to an array of circumstances ranging from genuine feelings of manipulation to frustration over the Party’s changing positions and priorities.

But this analysis deprives African Americans who embraced radical ideals, whether or not they joined the Party, of their voice and ability to determine which political course most suited their needs. More recently, historians have begun to give more credence to African Americans who chose Communism because they had reflected on political and economic circumstances, witnessed the Party’s efforts in the fight for Black freedom, and found that the Party helped give meaning to the lives of poor, segregated Blacks. In this respect, it is important to recognize that James and Esther Cooper Jackson, along with the multitude of people they influenced over the course of their long activist careers, were not dupes or pawns of the Soviet Union. They analyzed their options, observed the world around them, and concluded that Communism offered


the best opportunity to attain racial justice in the United States. Following their choices and their political evolution over the course of their lives illustrates that point.

Chapter one, spanning 1914-1941, outlines James Jackson and Esther Cooper’s upbrinings, political development, education, and early activism. Jackson and Cooper’s politics developed within the contexts of Jim Crow and the Great Depression. Both partners were raised in talented-tenth, middle-class families in Virginia. Cooper and Jackson’s parents espoused the politics of racial uplift and offered their children the opportunity to be upwardly mobile. Jackson was poised to become a pharmacist and Cooper was set for an academic career as a sociologist, but their exposure to extreme poverty, racism, and their socially-conscious upbrinings, coupled with the emergence of the Great Depression, led them to become activists and Communists. In 1937, Jackson helped to organize the Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC), a Popular Front organization dedicated to racial and economic justice in the South, and Cooper joined the organization in 1939. Through the SNYC, the couple began to build the foundations for their life as activists and for their relationship.

Chapter two explores the way Cooper and Jackson crafted their marriage and planned for their future during World War II. The couple married in 1941 and strove for an egalitarian household, which influenced their public activism throughout their lives. Cooper kept her maiden name when she married Jackson. As leaders of the SNYC, Cooper and Jackson imagined that the postwar years would provide the space for a left-wing mass movement dedicated to racial justice in Dixie. In the context of the wartime U.S.-Soviet alliance, Cooper and Jackson believed that the defeat of global fascism would undermine the United States’ racial caste system, and that a key component in
dismantling Jim Crow would include a nationwide embrace of socialism. The war years also introduced a period of separation in the couple’s life, as Jackson was drafted into the Army in 1943 and left to serve in the China-Burma-India Theater of War. The couple wrote letters daily during their separation, documenting their love, the growth of their new daughter, their political views, and their goals for the postwar years.

The third chapter examines the Jacksons’ life during the dissolution of the Black Popular Front in the postwar era. During this period the relationship between the U.S. and the Soviet Union deteriorated, thereby reshaping the Black Freedom Movement. The late 1940s were years of trial and error for activists fighting for racial justice. Cooper and Jackson left the SNYC in 1946 and Jackson took a leadership position in the CPUSA’s Louisiana chapter. The couple then moved to Detroit, Michigan a year later when the convergence of anticommunism and segregationism made leftist activism impossible in the South. As the potential for activist success in this era changed in accordance with the U.S. position in the Cold War, this chapter demonstrates that many activists’ choices and compromises were influenced by politics and diplomacy, as well as personal conviction and individual philosophy. In the midst of these transitions, James and Esther Cooper Jackson had their second daughter and strove to implement the activist goals they discussed during the war years.

In 1951, James Jackson was indicted under the Smith Act and disappeared into the CPUSA’s underground. Chapter four explores Esther Cooper Jackson’s response to her husband’s disappearance. When James Jackson’s legal troubles started, to support her husband, Cooper Jackson took his last name after ten years of marriage. Cooper Jackson’s efforts to publicize her husband’s legal troubles altered her involvement in the
Black freedom movement because she refocused her activist efforts from organizational movements to the defense of her husband and protection of her daughters. Joining forces with the Families Committee of Smith Act Victims and the National Committee to Defend Negro Leadership, she sought to defend her husband by connecting federal disinterest in civil rights violations to the FBI’s full-time pursuit of her husband and harassment of her family.

Chapter five examines James Jackson’s activities while he was underground and after he reemerged. During this era, Jackson’s writings reflect his belief that a new approach to the civil rights movement would revive the CPUSA. Writing under a pseudonym, Jackson criticized the Party’s position on civil rights. He argued that Communists should acknowledge that the people of the South had chosen the NAACP as their vehicle for change, and that the Party should offer support without attempting to usurp control of the movement. Jackson’s articles reflect his intellectual development as a Black Communist when Popular Front style activism gave way to civil rights. Jackson’s critiques offer an alternative to the Party’s image as a monolithic tool of the Soviet Union during the 1950s. In addition, Jackson became influential during these years in revising the Party’s position on the “Negro Question.” This chapter also examines the Party’s mounting troubles as U.S. animosity toward the Soviet Union intensified.

After his reemergence and trial, James Jackson became editor of the Party’s newspaper, The Worker. In 1961, Esther Cooper Jackson founded and edited Freedomways Magazine, a quarterly journal of the Black freedom movement. Chapter six argues that during these years, the couple’s independent careers were an expression of
their new sense of stability after decades of intermittent separation. The couple drew on their experiences as youth leaders during the 1930s and 1940s to influence and guide the younger generation of civil rights activists in the 1960s. The Jacksons’ egalitarian marriage allowed for individual editorial perspectives, as *Freedomways* and the Party differed on a number of key political issues. Offering analysis, reflections, and support through the two publications, the Jacksons continued to contribute to the Black freedom movement during the 1960s.

James and Esther Cooper Jackson remained adamant about their democratic right to hold political ideas that they believed would best serve the causes about which they were passionate. That their political affiliation was neither popular nor mainstream makes understanding the Jacksons’ choices all the more historically valuable. “Love and Activism” illustrates that Cold War anticommunism in the U.S. influenced activists in different ways. Even within the Jackson household, where one couple endured unique hardships as a result of their Communism, the Cold War and the Black freedom movement produced distinct individual experiences and political opinions. As individuals, the Jacksons valued their political differences as not only an expression of their commitment to debate as a source of political inspiration, but also as a representation of their love and respect for each other. Their experiences demonstrate that while political and diplomatic trends fractured large segments of the African American freedom struggle, a wide range of people with an array of political perspectives remained committed to the struggle and stayed connected with one another.
CHAPTER 1
“The Ardor in Our Enthusiasm”
James E. Jackson Jr. and Esther Cooper’s Paths to Activism and Each Other

When James Edward Jackson, Jr. was a small boy in Richmond, Virginia in the early twentieth century, he would stand outside of his father’s pharmacy on the corner of Brook Road and Du Bois Avenue every evening and wait. The strong stench of sweat and tobacco wafted his way before he saw anything coming, and then a throng of people appeared in the distance. The procession was comprised of tobacco workers heading home from Richmond’s tobacco factories. These workers were Black, mostly female, and desperately poor. Many were clad in burlap tobacco sacks that they had taken from the factory because they could not afford clothes. As Jackson observed, “the struggle for survival in poverty was written in the ragged clothes and shoelaces and the conditions of the houses they lived in.”

The women were exhausted, often ill, and earned an average of about six dollars per week. Even though their circumstances were difficult, the women would sing and shout with joy as they headed north toward their homes. Jackson said, “good evening” to each woman as she walked by the pharmacy, and he would stand outside until the last worker passed. For James Jackson, even as a child, the image of strength was naturally that of a Black worker and of a woman.

James Jackson and his future wife, Esther Cooper, grew up in middle-class, politically active Black households in the late Progressive Era. For African Americans, the Progressive Era offered a combination of setbacks and advancements. Progressivism emerged as a political movement in the late 19th century and led Americans to reconsider

1 James E. Jackson, Jr., interview with Sara Rzeszutek, 12 December 2002, Brooklyn, NY.
2 Esther Cooper Jackson, This Is My Husband: Fighter For His People, Political Refugee, (New York: National Committee to Defend Negro Leadership, 1953), 22.
the relationship of the individual and the state, gender roles, industrialization, wealth, status, and social difference.³ Progressivism in its broadest sense altered American life dramatically, particularly for the middle class and for whites. More concerned with social welfare, charity, purity, and improved labor conditions, Progressives employed a new sense of morality as a way of measuring the individual. Settlement houses offered new hope to impoverished immigrants, schools revamped curricula and received renewed support, and factories were overhauled to ensure the safety of workers and products alike. But in the wake of extensive efforts to improve the moral, economic, and political quality of life for white Americans, white Southerners continued to scramble to adapt to African American freedom after slavery. Massive racial violence against African Americans in the South was a widely accepted approach to dealing with race, but it was neither practical nor sustainable. To maintain an ordered, moral society, white Southerners determined that segregation was the most appropriate way to both maintain white supremacy and adhere to a strict Progressive moral code.⁴

For African Americans in the Progressive Era, the threat of white violence loomed large even as Jim Crow redrew the South’s social map. Any perceived step out of segregation’s boundaries riled white reaction and often resulted in lynching. Segregation was designed “to send an unmistakable message of racial inequality that would intimidate blacks and reassure whites [and] deprive blacks of so much economic and political opportunity that they would never threaten white power.”⁵ Nationwide, white progressives rationalized segregation as a positive alternative to race war, but the

⁴ Ibid., 192-194.
⁵ Ibid., 188.
inequality that Jim Crow engendered also produced a heightened drive for resistance among African Americans.

But not all white progressives embraced racial segregation as an essential component of an ordered world. In 1910, white and Black progressives joined together to form the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). At its outset, the NAACP modeled itself on abolitionist groups. Among its leaders, W.E.B. Du Bois believed that, as the historian David Howard-Pitney writes, “the South in 1919, as in the 1850s, was a reactionary society that stifled all dissent. Then as now, the South stood alone against rising national and international trends toward democracy and freedom.”

The NAACP fought segregation’s legal roots and worked to improve education for African Americans, focusing on opportunity and change. For the Black middle-class in the South, education, self-help, entrepreneurship, and professionalism promised a path toward a better future in spite of racial obstacles. These assets contributed to constructing what Du Bois referred to as “the talented tenth.” Well-educated and established Blacks, a small elite in the United States, could use their skills and standing to “oversee a community in crisis.” Du Bois argued, “The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men.”

James Jackson and Esther Cooper’s families fit the model of the talented tenth. Both sets of parents provided their children with a comfortable life, educational opportunities both in school and at home, and a moral upbringing. Jackson and Cooper each grew up with the foundations to build comfortable, middle-class lives for

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themselves as adults. But both were exposed to extreme poverty, and both became full-time activists. Jackson and Cooper each carried forward the principles of their socially conscious, talented-tenth childhoods, particularly concern for the politically, socially, and economically disenfranchised, and fused them with Communism. As they were becoming adults, the Great Depression, the Popular Front, the rise of the American Communist Movement, the United States’ changing relationship with the Soviet Union, and the ongoing Black freedom movement all made clear the relevance of socialism as a means to racial equality.

James Jackson’s father exerted a powerful influence on his social consciousness and participation in the Black freedom movement. A respected pharmacist and graduate of Howard University, James E. Jackson, Sr. had earned the admiration of the Black community. He was the second Black pharmacist in Richmond’s history. The Jackson family’s standing was a product of Jackson, Sr.’s education, profession and status as a business owner, along with his wife’s educational achievements. His wife, Clara Kersey Jackson, also graduated from Howard. She was a member of one of the first classes to accept female students and studied in the Conservatory of Music. The couple married on December 14, 1905.

While the Jackson family held an elevated social position in the community, they were not the economic equivalent of an average middle-class white family. As the historian Martin Summers has written, “the black middle class is defined more by its self-conscious positioning against the black working class – through its adherence to a

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9 James and Esther Cooper Jackson papers, Box 1 Folder 1, Tamiment Library, New York University, New York, NY.
specific set of social values and the public performance of those values – than by real
economic and occupational differences.”

Jackson, Sr. “envisioned the emergence of a
large monied [sic] Negro business class as both a possibility in the American free
enterprise market of the turn of the century, and as a necessity to ensure a minimum of
economic independence and self-sufficiency to the Negro masses.”

However, Jackson, Sr.’s position did not divide him geographically or socially from the poor Black
community in Richmond. Middle class status was no shield from the insults of white
racism in the South, and the indignities of segregation affected the family’s approach to
politics. Jackson, Sr. stood as a symbol of hope, compassion, and upward mobility for
the community.

In early twentieth-century Richmond, a strong sense of community guided the
city’s African Americans through changing times. New segregation laws and white
political backlash against Blacks led to a reconfiguration of Richmond’s social and
political structure, and African Americans adapted accordingly. The Jackson family

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11 Esther Cooper Jackson, _This Is My Husband: Fighter for his People, Political Refugee_, (New York: National Committee to Defend Negro Leadership, 1953), 10.
lived in a neighborhood known as “Jackson Ward,” a section of Richmond that had “political, social, and economic importance even after white city councilmen gerrymandered the district out of existence in 1903.”

Jackson Ward lived on in memory, imagination, and mythology, and represented African American claims to the social terrain of Richmond. The historians Elsa Barkley Brown and Gregg D. Kimball write that Jackson Ward was “a function of history, collective memory, mythology, and power…a function of legislation, politics, and inequality…an act undertaken by black people, a distinction that turned it into a place of congregation as well as segregation.”

African Americans in Richmond made claims to community and geographic space even as white city authorities attempted to segregate and disenfranchise them. Within their community, class and gender divisions created internal conflict and drew the ire of whites. For instance, Black middle- and upper-class women in Richmond strove for an image of respectability, and their dress epitomized their status within the community. They were set apart from poor and working-class women who could not afford stylish clothing. To whites, Black women who were not well-dressed became the objects of spectacle and speculation, as their class status and race suggested that they might be prostitutes, criminals, or simply lazy. But stylish Black women did not escape the racist scorn of whites. Whites thought that professional African American women who were well-dressed threatened the status of white women, whose “money was being used to finance an extravagant, wasteful, and most important, nonsubservient lifestyle of

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14 Brown and Kimball, 85.
black women who more appropriately belonged in domestic work.” For the Jackson family, professionalism and middle-class status distinguished them socially from poor Blacks within the African American community and gave them some status with whites, but they were no less a part of Jim Crow’s rigid social hierarchy.

In general, Jackson, Sr. had a positive rapport with powerful whites in Richmond. The head of the Cliff Weil Cigar Company described Jackson, Sr. in a reference letter as, “honorable and in every way high class in his dealings…as clean a cut merchant and darkey as [I have] ever met.” While Jim Crow sharply divided Richmond and racism colored the cigar merchant’s portrayal of him, Jackson, Sr. was the type of man who defied white Virginians’ stereotypes about African Americans. But his good relationship with local whites did not mean that he accommodated racism. He insisted on respect from any merchant with whom he did business, and expected them to “address him as ‘Mr.’ or ‘Dr.’, and refer to his wife as ‘Mrs.’” White merchants usually but begrudgingly complied. Yet in one frightening instance, bullets flew through a window a few feet from infant Clara’s crib in the family’s apartment above the store. The threat of white violence loomed large for any Black businessperson who demanded equal treatment.

Beyond demanding cordiality from white merchants, Jackson, Sr. fought segregation and racism head on. He and his friends once successfully impeded the segregated trolley car transit system in Richmond for several hours, a battle in which

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15 Ibid., 101.
16 Letter 6/14/1914, Box 1 Folder 22, Jackson Papers.
17 Cooper Jackson, 12.
18 Esther Cooper Jackson conversation with Author, 17 Nov 2008.
Jackson, Sr. was “beaten bloodily and jailed, but not before he had defended himself.”

He believed that the problem of racism extended beyond the segregated South and spoke against World War I, declaring that it was “an imperialist war of thieving nations whose hands would be forever stained with the innocent blood of the outraged African and Asian peoples.” In the 1920s, Jackson, Sr. served as treasurer of the Richmond Committee of Civic Improvement League. The organization played a leading role in protesting racially restrictive housing covenants in Richmond, and won a victory in a legal battle that went to the Supreme Court.

Jackson, Sr.’s drugstore served as a base for his political activities as local men converged to discuss “the whole galaxy of human knowledge and experience.”

Jackson, Sr.’s circle embraced the liberationist attitude of W.E.B. Du Bois, which was expressed in the 1906 Credo of the all-Black Niagara Movement. Du Bois declared that Black Americans “will not be satisfied to take one jot or tittle less than our full manhood rights…and until we get these rights we will never cease to protest.” Du Bois’s militancy inspired Jackson, Sr.’s social circle into political struggle. Like Du Bois, most of these men opposed Booker T. Washington’s “policy of conciliation.”

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19 Cooper Jackson, 10.
20 Ibid., 11.
22 Ibid, 12.
23 “The Niagara Movement,” Oxford W.E.B. Du Bois Reader (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 374. The Niagara Movement was an organization of Black middle-class professionals who first organized in 1905 in Erie, Ontario, Canada and resolved to fight for comprehensive citizenship rights for African Americans. When the NAACP was organized five years later, it absorbed most of the Niagara members.
24 Cooper Jackson, 10.
25 Ibid.
Washington was the first principal of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, where young African Americans learned trade skills, teaching, domestic work, and were urged to appreciate manual labor as a path to advancement. He famously advocated the public accommodation of segregation. Washington earned recognition by urging Southern Blacks to “cast down your bucket where you are,” draw on their skills and immediate surroundings to create lives for themselves, and aspire to comfort within the confines of the South’s inflexible racial order. Moderate whites responded well to Washington, and he was invited to dine at the White House in 1901 with President Theodore Roosevelt.

But many Blacks, like Du Bois and Jackson, Sr.’s circle, disagreed with Washington and argued that social, economic, educational, and political parity with whites was the only way forward for African Americans. They favored the “education of the whole man to enable him to exercise all the functions as a citizen of democracy.” Nonetheless, Washington’s tactics inspired debate. One man in Jackson, Sr.’s group insisted that Washington’s tactics were indeed subversive. He “would expound on the hidden meaning, the ‘tricking-the-white-folk’ wisandoms” of Washington’s methods.26 This man perceptively saw resistance lurking behind Washington’s public persona. Whereas Du Bois’s public posture was far more militant than Washington’s, the Tuskegee principal did indeed work behind the scenes to fight legalized segregation.27

James Jackson, Jr. was born on November 29, 1914. He had an older sister, Alice. His younger sister, Clara, was born a few years later. As a boy, Jackson, Jr.

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26 Ibid., 10, 12.
observed his father, uncles, and neighbors as they debated politics and planned protests in the back room of the pharmacy. Jackson, Sr. offered his children Du Bois’s teachings, feeding them a “steady diet of readings from ‘As the Crow Flies,’” the youth section of the NAACP periodical, *The Crisis.*\(^{28}\) James E. Jackson, Jr. absorbed his father’s militancy and developed a political astuteness that drove his intellect and activities.

As a young Black boy growing up in segregated Richmond, Virginia, it was not difficult to develop understanding of how race and class provided or denied opportunities. Early on in school, Jackson excelled. His classmates and neighbors were the desperately poor children of tobacco workers. Growing up, Jackson noticed that many of the poor students who had some academic successes faced difficulties as they grew older. As they became increasingly able, these children “were a part of the bread-winning combination of their families. After school and on weekends, they worked long hours selling papers, shining shoes, gathering junk, hauling groceries.”\(^{29}\) The economic demands of struggling families in a struggling community forced intellectually capable students to leave school for unskilled positions that would sustain their family, but would not help them to advance. Jackson saw clearly the privileges that his family’s more comfortable economic status afforded him, and the difficulties his classmates faced never left his mind.

As Jackson became aware of Richmond’s stark social and economic divisions, he immersed himself in scholarly, artistic, and athletic endeavors. As a senior, he designed the cover of the Armstrong High School yearbook. The image depicted two figures, each climbing upward. As Jackson described, “The figure holding the torch represents the

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\(^{29}\) Cooper Jackson, 15.
graduating student, bearing the torch of knowledge, obtained at Armstrong; by means of its light he is able to aid his weaker brother as he climbs the ragged mountain of life, to attain the success which lies on the summit of the heights.”

Jackson’s Richmond upbringing and education distinctly shaped his worldview. The opportunities he had and the support his family offered, he believed, would not limit his ability to succeed. He had a responsibility to use his success to help others who had been denied the chances he had.

When he was about twelve years old, Jackson organized the first Black troop of boys to be admitted into the Boy Scouts of America in Virginia. Geared toward middle-class youth, the Boy Scouts of America formed in 1910 alongside a number of other youth organizations that sought to provide structure and regulation to children’s recreation. Scouting reinforced “boys’ work” as an essential component of developing the masculinity that drove politics and patriotism during this period. Jackson saw in the Scouts an opportunity for “a life of evangelical work in strictest conformity to the credo and laws of the worthy order.” The Scouts “emphasized the drive for individual achievement but also the necessity of team play” as part of their mission.

A Boy Scout uniform usually would draw the respect of fellow citizens, as it meant that the young man wearing it had resisted “the overwhelming temptation of illicit and soul-destroying pleasures” in favor of social responsibility and respectable manhood. This did not apply to Jackson. Shortly after acquiring his uniform, Jackson

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30 Ibid., 16.
31 Michael McGerr, A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920, 112. For more on manliness and masculinity in the early twentieth century, see Martin Summers, Manliness and its Discontents; Marlon Ross, Manning the Race: Reforming Black Men in the Jim Crow Era.
32 James E. Jackson to Esther Cooper, undated, World War II Correspondence, James and Esther Cooper Jackson Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University, New York, NY.
33 McGerr, 112.
34 McGerr, 111; Summers, Manliness and its Discontents.
“inadvertently sat beside an aged, dignified, aristocratic looking white couple on the rearmost seat of the Chamberlyn Avenue bus – apologizing as I did so.” Though Jackson was well versed in the Jim Crow way of life, his youth, his uniform, and his faith in humanity had not prepared him for what happened next. The man, as Jackson later recalled:

Like some knight accosted by a dragoon, leaped up, seized my Scout ax and holding it menacingly over my head with tremulous hand and in hysterical phrases ordered me (“filthy, black little nigger”) to stand up where I belonged. I searched the eyes of his woman companion with eyes wide with pain and soul searing shock. I questioned her eyes to find a reprimand there for his act of barbarian manners but I saw only cold, steel grey pools of religious, racial arrogance there. Something in me dies, never to be born again. And something new was born…: a ferocious hatred for the haters of my people –later to be enlarged to embrace all the oppressed of the world…From 12 to 16 I lived in a world of hate.  

The humiliation and fear that accompanied this experience led Jackson to guard himself against the pain of racism by using hatred as a shield. Jackson graduated from high school at the age of sixteen. That same year, his individual politics grew better defined as he had several transformational experiences. By sixteen, he had earned the rank of Eagle Scout. The ceremony where new Eagle Scouts received their honors from the governor of Virginia reinforced for Jackson that his accomplishments did not supercede his race in the eyes of the most powerful man in Virginia.

At the John Marshall Hall, known as the “‘society’ sanctuary of white supremacy,” where the ceremony was held, Jackson recalled, “The only entrance for blacks was the freight elevator.” Jackson was only allowed to invite his father along, though several family members accompanied most other scouts. The only other Black guest at the ceremony was a man named William Jordan. In spite of the high honor that

35 James E. Jackson to Esther Cooper, undated, World War II Correspondence, James and Esther Cooper Jackson Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University, New York, NY.
came with the rank of Eagle Scout, the Black honoree and attendees navigated their way around the building and through an alleyway to find the freight elevator entrance. Once inside, Jackson, Sr. and Jordan sat off to the side of the rest of the audience in wooden folding chairs. The younger Jackson sat on one side of the platform, and the eleven white scouts sat on the other.

When the time came for Virginia Governor John Garland Pollard to pin the badges on the new Eagle Scouts, he honored each white scout with his badge, and a handshake or congratulatory pat on the head. When he saw Jackson, “he stepped back and just grunted… for me, he tossed [the award] and I caught it.” Though the affront was cause for humiliation, Jackson used the moment as an opportunity to exhibit the character traits of a proud Eagle Scout. He recalled, “I pinned it on myself, and saluted, and the audience applauded that. And they separated themselves from the rudeness of the governor.”

Following the event, Jackson took a stand. He wrote a letter to James E. West, the Chief Scout of the Boy Scouts of America, explaining his experience. He argued that segregation within the Boy Scouts was an injustice, hoping that his letter would be a catalyst for change within the organization. But West sent a defensive reply, and Jackson resigned in protest.

Jackson enrolled at Virginia Union University in February of 1931, at the age of sixteen. Virginia Union University grew out of the Richmond Theological Seminary, and was founded as a historically Black college in Richmond on February 17, 1900.

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37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 Cooper Jackson, 16.
Although the University earned most of its financial support from the American Baptist Home Missionary Association, the school was officially non-sectarian. The University absorbed neighboring Hartshorne Memorial College, a similar institution for Black women, in 1932. It boasted respected faculty members and was one of just five higher education institutions for Blacks in the state.\textsuperscript{40} Virginia Union and Hartshorne stood in view of the Carrington and Michaux Tobacco Stemming Company. This juxtaposition of menial labor and higher education illustrated the contrast in economic prospects for Black Richmond youth.

Having grown up in a poor section of Richmond, despite his family’s status, Jackson came of age believing that college students felt superior to the surrounding community. He knew the cost of higher education made it a prohibitive luxury, and many of his high school classmates, no matter how gifted, could barely entertain the notion of college, let alone make it reality. Initially, despite enrolling in Virginia Union, he tried to stay true to his roots, and “rather ridiculously strained to keep himself ‘pure’ of any real identification with the manners of the collegian.”\textsuperscript{41} When Jackson became immersed in college culture, however, he learned that his earlier viewpoint was misguided. He discovered that most college students “weren’t the ‘arrogant conceited asses’ that he and his friends might call them, but hard-working young men and women, toiling at odd jobs after school hours and throughout the summer months; denying themselves the small pleasures, and along with their parents pinching and saving that they might buy the tools of a higher learning and ‘make something really worthwhile’ out of

\textsuperscript{40} Workers of the Writers’ Program of the Works Progress Administration in the State of Virginia, The Negro in Virginia, (Winston-Salem: John F. Blair, Publisher, 1994), 294-304.
\textsuperscript{41} Cooper Jackson, 17.
their lives.”

This realization was crucial in the development of Jackson’s politics. Growing up surrounded by poverty and racism gave him empathy and insight into the daily struggles of the working class, and his education became the foundation for his efforts on their behalf.

Jackson was particularly fortunate to attend college during the Great Depression. The economic crash of 1929 resulted in a twenty-five percent unemployment rate nationwide. For many African Americans in the South, poverty was not new, but the breadth of poverty during the Depression years put economic and educational opportunities for African Americans even further out of reach. As the political scientist Ira Katznelson writes, “The world economy’s collapse after 1929, especially as it affected agriculture, deepened the poverty experienced by the vast majority of the South’s black workforce….the small, fragile black middle classes on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line came under intense pressure, having gained only a very tenuous attachment to stable jobs with regular wage incomes, cultural respectability, and chances for mobility before the depression hit.”

Even as government efforts to assuage the worst of the Depression brought some relief, Blacks were almost wholly excluded from the benefits of the New Deal. Jackson, Sr.’s career as an entrepreneur and pharmacist made him vital to his community and afforded his children opportunities even in the face of widespread economic despair.

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42 Ibid.
Though earning average academic marks, Jackson’s reputation as a charismatic campus leader started early in his college career when he became president of the freshman class. He encouraged his peers to use their education to improve the conditions of the working class worldwide. Jackson delivered a speech on Freshman Day entitled, “The World beyond the Campus.” The speech was reprinted in The Intercollegian and the Richmond Times-Dispatch. As his perspective on the social position of college students evolved, he saw in his classmates’ passion, ambition, and sense of sacrifice the potential for global change. He began by asking his fellow students to imagine walking beyond the pristine campus to another section of Richmond. He described the despair poverty had wrought for Blacks in other parts of the city and then connected that to the problem of poverty worldwide. His speech closed, “Ten million Chinese are destitute—no food—no homes—no hope… A coolie misses his evening ‘rice’—we echo the pangs of his hunger…. There is a world beyond the campus.” He described how the adversity caused by Richmond’s racial and economic divisions was not unique to the city, the state, or the South. Jackson related local struggles to an international economic context.

The connections Jackson drew between local situations in the U.S. South and the global struggle against race and class oppression echoed one of his primary influences, W.E.B. Du Bois. Du Bois had long emphasized “worldwide networks that encompass Europe, Africa, the industrial United States, and the ‘colonies that belt the globe.’” In an essay on the start of World War I titled, “The African Roots of the War,” Du Bois

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44 Cooper Jackson, 17.
45 James E. Jackson to Esther Cooper, undated, World War II Correspondence, James and Esther Cooper Jackson Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University, New York, NY.
presented a line of thinking that Jackson drew from when connecting his college classmates to Chinese peasants. Du Bois wrote that World War I was “the result of jealousies engendered by the recent rise of armed national associations of labor and capital whose aim is the exploitation of the wealth of the world mainly outside the European circle of nations.”\textsuperscript{48} The war, Du Bois argued, consisted of the conflicts between white Europeans who stood to profit from the natural and human resources in other parts of the world.

While the United States avoided the conflict until it was nearly over, its own racial and class tensions were enmeshed with Europe’s. Du Bois argued that discontented white workers in the United States were mollified by threats that Black workers would replace them should they decide to strike. The result, Du Bois wrote, would be that, “We gain industrial peace at home at the mightier cost of war abroad.” In other words, anxieties about labor were quelled by reassuring whites that their supremacy was in tact, but uniting whites on this basis only contributed to the larger tensions that were brewing across the globe. To Du Bois, the larger problem was the global color line, and people of color worldwide grew increasingly restless as Europeans fought for democracy on their own small continent. He argued that Europe needed to grant the “democratic ideal to the yellow, brown, and black peoples” in order to avoid even deeper calamity.\textsuperscript{49}

Following Du Bois, Jackson argued that people of color across the globe bore the brunt of white competition over capital; that the hunger pangs of Jackson’s Chinese

peasant resulted from the same racist ideology that separated Black Americans from white Americans. When Du Bois visited China several years after Jackson’s speech, he remarked, “A little white boy of perhaps four years order[ed] three Chinese out of his imperial way on the sidewalk … It looked quite like Mississippi.”

As Jackson reconciled his privileged upbringing against the backdrop of acute poverty, he began to acknowledge that his education was more than a means for economic upward mobility. He, like his classmates, had an opportunity as an African American earning a college degree during the Great Depression to work against the barriers that capitalism, racism, and class divisions created worldwide. His Freshman Day speech urged Virginia Union students to “dedicate their lives to the people as the sole motive and justification for their more favored circumstances.”

Impressed by the speech, Jackson’s classmates nominated him to attend an interracial seminar in North Carolina the following summer. At the Young Men’s Christian Association conference at Kings Mountain, he met the first white people who did not treat him as though he was inferior. Until 1926, Kings Mountain had been a segregated YMCA training school for Blacks, and whites from the southeast met at nearby Blue Ridge. The YMCA had long been the most widely represented youth organization for African Americans, but its segregation policies came under fire as Blacks and whites increasingly agitated for “Christian brotherhood” across racial lines. Neither Blue Ridge nor Kings Mountain integrated easily, particularly because many Southern white YMCA members remained attached to segregation. But a few whites were more open to meeting at Kings Mountain, and the seminar Jackson attended was

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51 Cooper Jackson, 17.
integrated.\textsuperscript{52} The seminar deepened Jackson’s belief that productive change in the conditions in the South should include all members of society; that people of all races working together to improve the social, economic, and political climate could make an impact. After conversations with a young white Communist at this seminar, Jackson devoted the summer of 1931 to the study of Marxism and joined the Communist Party.\textsuperscript{53} He recalled that this moment of transformation initiated “wonderful years heralding the revolution and toppling of the gods of bourgeois respectability in every direction.”\textsuperscript{54}

The Communist Party, USA gained increasing popularity across the United States as economic despair devastated large portions of the country. In the face of capitalism’s apparent failure, more Americans were amenable to the notion that the U.S. economic structure could change. For African Americans, the CPUSA offered a unique opportunity for political advancement and economic parity that was unavailable with other American political organizations. The Party worked actively to court African Americans during the Depression as well and sought to provide solutions to racial problems in the South. In 1928, the Party offered a formal statement on the “Negro Question” and articulated the “Black Belt thesis.” The Black Belt thesis argued that Black Americans living in the Deep South constituted a nation within a nation, and this status afforded them the right to self-determination. Modeled on the Soviet Union’s republics, the Black Belt thesis became the Party’s doctrine on African Americans. By considering Black Americans a separate nation within the United States, the Party’s thesis effectively removed race from the equation of social problems. Without the tense issue of race to reckon with, the Party

\textsuperscript{52} Nina Mjagkij, \textit{A Light in the Darkness: African Americans and the YMCA, 1852-1946}, (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1994).
\textsuperscript{53} Cooper Jackson, 18.
\textsuperscript{54} James E. Jackson to Esther Cooper, undated, World War II Correspondence, James and Esther Cooper Jackson Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University, New York, NY.
could focus on the issue of class exclusively.\textsuperscript{55} The Black Belt thesis also offered African Americans a claim to the South, where they constituted the majority of the labor force but reaped few of the benefits.

In 1931, the Party solidified its standing with African Americans when it became involved in the legal defense of nine Black boys charged with raping two white women. On March 25, 1931, nine young black males, aged 12-19, were riding a freight train in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Their names were Haywood Patterson, Roy Wright, Willie Roberson, Eugene Williams, Olen Montgomery, Ozie Powell, Andy Wright, Clarence Norris, and Charles Weems. Two white women, Ruby Bates and Victoria Price, also hopped onto the train. After a conflagration between the 9 black boys and a group of white men, Price and Bates asserted that, “twelve black men” had gang raped them. Despite Bates’ later recantation, the Scottsboro boys’ legal trouble lasted into the 1950s. Hayward Patterson, the last of the boys to leave Alabama, did so in a dramatic escape from prison in 1948. The CPUSA and its legal arm, the International Labor Defense, notoriously defended the boys, and the NAACP competed for the case. The boys and their parents remained loyal to the ILD, in part because of the NAACP’s bureaucratic approach to the boys.\textsuperscript{56} African Americans responded favorably to the CPUSA’s work with the Scottsboro boys in part because so many similar cases in the past had led directly to lynching without any intervention from the justice system.

\textsuperscript{55} Mark Naison, \textit{Communists in Harlem During the Depression}; Kelley, \textit{Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists in the Great Depression}.

Angelo Herndon’s struggle against the Georgia justice system was another case that united African Americans and Communists. Herndon, a 19-year-old Black Communist originally from Ohio, moved to Fulton County, Georgia in 1932. He had traveled to the South to help organize unemployed workers, both Black and white. Southern police feared Herndon and arrested him after he led a group of destitute Southerners in a demonstration at the Fulton County Courthouse. Without a basis for arresting Herndon, police excavated an arcane anti-insurrection law dating back to 1861 that was originally written to apply to slave rebellions. Herndon was convicted and sentenced to 18-20 years in prison, but was released in 1934 after an appeals process. His case had rallied the support of African Americans and international observers, and again solidified the CPUSA and ILD’s standing with African Americans during the Depression.57

The Angelo Herndon case also signified the start of a new pattern in radical Communist-influenced protest during the Depression years. By leading both white and Black workers at the Fulton County Courthouse, Herndon’s so-called insurrection exemplified interracial working-class unity, which was growing more popular as the Depression wore on. For many white workers, it was no longer economically advantageous to distance themselves from Blacks, and unity appeared to be an appropriate approach for combating capitalism’s failure. The proletariat, it appeared, was no longer divided along racial lines, and this class solidarity among poor Blacks and whites terrified Southern authorities. It surely contributed to Herndon’s prosecution, but it also reflected the CPUSA’s growing influence on social movements. Jackson learned

through the CPUSA’s writings that, “the Negro people have a powerful ally in the white workers and that it is to the self-interest of both to unite in common struggle… the task of correct leadership was to fight for this unity of the Southern people—Negro and white workers—to weld it, and to win allies for them in the nation and throughout the world.”

Jackson’s middle class upbringing afforded him a set of privileges that set him apart from most of his community, and his understanding of Communism was grounded in a complex intellectual and theoretical tradition. But his arrival at the conclusion that Communism was the best path to justice for poor and working class African Americans was rooted in his everyday exposure to the depths of economic oppression and racism. As his experience at his Eagle Scout ceremony illustrates, Jackson’s achievements were always tempered by his race in the eyes of whites. Despite his family’s economic standing, the insults of segregation meant that Jackson’s intellectual approach to Communism was fused with lived experience.

Jackson’s membership in the CPUSA was the result of both his intellectual background and his exposure to racism and poverty, and his story offers a unique blend of reasons for joining the Party. For white college student Junius Scales, embracing Communism was the result of an intellectual journey during his first year of college. A student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill from an affluent background, Scales was an astute observer of social and political injustice. He opposed segregation and labor exploitation, and sought a political ideology to reflect this. He read widely and had a number of conversations with fellow students about the benefits of Communism. While he ultimately disliked some of Communism’s most outspoken ideologues, Scales decided the Party offered an opportunity to realize his “old dream of building the

58 Cooper Jackson, 18.
brotherhood of man.” He was also drawn to Communists’ “camaraderie and…privileged sense of belonging.” Scales was soon dissatisfied with his decision and planned to drop out of the Party after a few months, but then met a Communist who gave the Party renewed meaning. The Communist recognized Scales’s disillusionment and explained, “It’s working people and Negroes that make the Party tick. They don’t join in a burst of idealism like a lot of students do. They join because they need it.”

While Jackson’s path to the Communist Party was a product of his education, his conclusion that CP ideology was a correct approach to racial and class activism was as much an organic result of his social and geographic context as it would have been for a poor tobacco worker. As the historian Robin D. G. Kelley writes, working class radical men and women “came from the farms, factories, mines, kitchens, and city streets, not as intellectual blank sheets but loaded down with cultural and ideological baggage molded by their race, class, gender, work, community, region, history, upbringing, and collective memory.” The Alabama Communist Hosea Hudson recalled that during a meeting led by a Communist who detailed the disadvantages Blacks faced in the South, he thought to himself, “my grandmother, my mother, my brother and I and so many more of us hoped to go to school—and we never stopped hoping—we never did get a chance. Right here and now we Blacks are the last to be hired and the first to be fired.” In this reflection, Hudson realized that his personal situation was aligned with the Communist leader’s ideas, regardless of his illiteracy and lack of education.

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60 Ibid., 69.
Jackson’s discovery of Communism allowed him to strike a balance between his loyalties to poor and working-class Black Richmond and his elite educational background. Though he grew up with professional, educated parents, in the midst of the Great Depression his community illustrated to Jackson the worst that abject poverty had to offer. Tobacco workers streaming past his father’s pharmacy and schoolmates whose chances to advance in education were stunted by economics reminded Jackson of his good fortune.

Communism transformed Jackson from a boy whose faith in humanity was dashed by a racist white couple, whose world was full of hate and suspicion, into a young man who had a renewed faith in the power of unity and the potential for change. The Party would provide Jackson’s activism, intellect, and accomplishments with meaning. Communism also forced Jackson to consider the importance of national and international economic and racial systems, emphasizing unity among workers. Jackson applied his communism to student activism and was best remembered at Virginia Union University for organizing a Marxist Club, the Proletarian Students Party, and the Cooperative Independents Club. Jackson was also known for student activism while he was a graduate student in Howard University’s pharmacy program between 1934 and 1937. As a member of the Young Communist League, the Marxist Study Circle, and the Liberal Club, he participated in strikes for the passage of anti-lynching legislation, against war and against the high cost of living.63

Jackson’s growing commitment to Communist theory and practice initially caused some strife with his parents. His newfound politics led him to push at racial barriers, and in one instance he participated in a “‘mass’ violation of Jim Crow seating at [an] Inter-

63 Cooper Jackson, 20.
racial Commission meeting creating consternation and humiliating my mother before all of her ‘fine’ friends.” His protest activity nearly got him expelled from Virginia Union. At his father’s pharmacy, he attempted to assuage some of the pain of the Depression for Richmond’s poor Blacks, leading to “violent anti-filial arguments over giving away father’s drugs to [the] unemployed.”

These conflicts were political as much as they were normal generational disagreements between parents and children. Jackson, Sr. was of a generation that viewed the “self-made man as the epitome of success.” His education, entrepreneurship, and profession paved a path out of the mire of racial poverty and gave him standing in both the admiring Black community and reluctant white community. Though Jackson, Sr. openly protested racist practices, his status as a middle-class professional cemented the notion of racial uplift as his political ideology. As the historian Kevin K. Gaines writes, men like Jackson, Sr. “believed that they were replacing the racist notion of fixed biological differences with an evolutionary view of cultural assimilation, measured primarily by the status of the family and civilization.”

By creating a household culture of individual responsibility and family unity to exemplify racial respectability, Jackson, Sr. “[dissembled] in order to survive in a racialized world not of [his] own making.” When Jackson adopted Communism, he not only rebelled

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64 James E. Jackson to Esther Cooper, undated, World War II Correspondence, James and Esther Cooper Jackson Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University, New York, NY.
65 Ibid.
66 Summers, 1.
68 Ibid., 5. The historian Darlene Clark Hine argues that a “culture of dissemblance” describes African American cultural and social responses to the oppressive structure of racism in the United States, particularly in reaction to sexual violence against Black women. Dissemblance, Hine writes, “involved creating the appearance of disclosure, or openness about themselves and their feelings, while actually remaining enigmatic.” Gaines extends Hine’s theory of dissemblance to apply to the politics of racial uplift.
against his father’s authority as a parent, he also dismissed the politics that structured the whole of his father’s racial being.

Nevertheless, Jackson did not rebel completely against his father. From Virginia Union University, he followed in his father’s footsteps and received his pharmacy degree from Howard University. As he completed his education, he faced a dilemma. Since the time he was a small boy, his family and community expected that he would eventually take over his father’s business. As a toddler, he played with chemistry sets. His educational path pointed to pharmacy as a career. But as he prepared to fulfill the promise of his upbringing, Jackson found himself more concerned with the social and economic inequality Blacks faced across the Jim Crow South. His student activism at both Virginia Union and Howard captivated his imagination more than his science and pharmacology courses. Jackson managed to be both a pharmacist and an activist for a few years after graduating from Howard, but it was clear that his passion was not his father’s career.

Jackson found an outlet for activism not long after graduating from Howard. From February 14-16, 1936, he attended the organizing conference of the National Negro Congress (NNC) in Chicago. The NNC, which had strong ties to the Communist Party, offered Black Americans a left-wing alternative to the liberal NAACP. As the historian Marc Solomon writes, “For the hundreds of blacks and whites who gathered in Chicago—and for the millions whom they represented—the quest for racial justice had

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He writes, “Bitter, divisive memories of the violence and humiliations of slavery and segregation were and remain at the heart of uplift ideology’s romance of the patriarchal family, expressed by black men and women’s too-often-frustrated aspirations to protect and be protected.” Black elite and middle class men, then, dissembled to guard themselves against the psychological harm racism caused and to create the appearance of a normative social and familial life to promote racial advancement. Darlene Clark Hine, *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-construction of American History*, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), 41.
become an integral part of the struggle for economic, political, and social progress. Not since the founding of the NAACP had the Negro question become such an essential element of a broad progressive agenda.\textsuperscript{69} The NNC was designed to “activate and politicize the grass roots of the black community” by “endorsing the organization of black labor, attacking lynchings, and supporting black businesses.”\textsuperscript{70}

The NNC offered a link between CPUSA influence and Black freedom organizations. Before the Depression and New Deal, the relationship between CPUSA and organizations designed to help African Americans was a tense one. At the outset, the CPUSA approached racial struggles from a class perspective. Focusing on the large number of poor and working-class African Americans, the CPUSA appeared dismissive and at times hostile to middle-class blacks and “moderate protest and betterment organizations the ‘black bourgeoisie’ supported.”\textsuperscript{71} According to Solomon, the Party exhibited particular enmity toward the Urban League for “fawning before the capitalists” and the NAACP for its “solid middle-class credentials, its anticommunism, its faith in the legal system, and its status as a pillar of the community.”\textsuperscript{72} The NAACP and the Party had a consistently strained relationship and while other groups with distinct ideologies might coexist, Communists and racial liberals could not. The Party believed that the NAACP inhibited mass action by catering to the bourgeois legal system, that the Association did “the job of social fascists—diverting blacks and whites from forming ‘fighting alliances’ in the streets.”\textsuperscript{73} The NAACP adopted a similarly antagonistic stance

\textsuperscript{69} Marc Solomon, The Cry was Unity: Communists and African Americans, 1917-1936, (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1998), 304-305.
\textsuperscript{72} Solomon, 170.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 171.
toward the Party. Du Bois, who would later join the CPUSA, represented NAACP opinion on the Party in 1931 when he called Communist activity in the South “too despicable for words.” He later wrote in an editorial for the *Crisis* that the CPUSA lacked the “honesty, earnestness and intelligence of the NAACP during twenty years of desperate struggle.”\(^7^4\) When the Party went head-to-head with the NAACP over the Scottsboro case, this animosity intensified.

Only when the Popular Front began did the anxieties between the CPUSA and the NAACP begin to dissipate. The Popular Front, which grew out of the global economic Depression, unified activists in the 1930s behind progressive causes. Initiated in 1935 by the Communist International and the Soviet Union, the Popular Front introduced some flexibility into the CPUSA and altered the notion that all Party policy came directly from Moscow. It also represented the earliest opposition to the rise of fascism across Europe. In the United States, the goal of the Popular Front movement was to unite leftist organizations and quietly influence activism across the nation and the world with Communist ideas. Communists got involved in a wide network of labor unions, civil rights organizations, and any other group that explicitly opposed fascism. Instead of forcing these organizations to adopt strict Communist principles, Party members subtly influenced these groups with their ideas, suggestions, and methods. Between 1936 and 1938, the Communist Party doubled its membership from about 40,000 to about 82,000, and the Popular Front’s antifascist, reform-minded platform was at the heart of that growth. As Earl Browder, a CPUSA leader, said, “Communism is twentieth-century Americanism.”\(^7^5\) Many Popular Front organizations in the United States were interracial

\(^7^5\) Schrecker, 15.
and working-class, devoted to labor reform and civil rights. The NNC was part of the Popular Front movement in the United States.

It is no coincidence that the Popular Front emerged when it did. Global economic depression brought about the rise of both liberalism and a leftist critique of liberalism in the U.S. Based on the notion that capitalism and democracy were inextricably linked, liberals fought the depression from within the system. Liberalism was rooted in the notion that the government was the solution to the nation’s ills, and that reform could be implemented by using existing social, legal, political, and economic structures. As liberalism emerged as the next major political movement, liberal politicians actively distanced themselves from socialism by promoting, preserving, and rescuing capitalism. While Franklin D. Roosevelt’s presidency was not as overtly anticommunist as the liberal presidents who followed, his efforts to assuage the difficulties of the Depression saved capitalism.

But for those on the political left, the Depression solidified the idea that capitalism needed to be discarded, not revived. When the Popular Front movement unleashed Communism from its hierarchical structure, left-leaning and Communist activists had little difficulty winning the support of the down-and-out. Communism, in its milder Popular Front form, not only appeared to offer new long-term solutions to the economic woes of the nation’s workers, it also helped exploited workers, African Americans, and disenchanted activists feel that they were making active contributions to immediate change. Just as James Jackson’s upbringing in a politically progressive, 

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middle-class household where he was also exposed to desperate poverty led him to embrace Communism, the Popular Front fused an intellectual and theoretical movement to the needs of individuals experiencing real-life economic despair.

James Jackson was excited by the prospects of an organization like the NNC. But, along with friends Edward Strong and James Ashford, Jackson believed that young Black southerners would benefit from an organization that emphasized southern concerns, rather than a northern-dominated national organization. The young activist Augusta Strong wrote that, “Numbers of militant youth came to the [NNC] meeting. They felt at once that the acute problems of their people in the North were indissoluble [sic] from those of the South…All were agreed that a successful Southern Negro youth movement would be a powerful force in winning equality and opportunity for all young Negroes and for raising their standards of life in general.”

In the past, it happened that most progressive Southern organizations had been branches of Northern organizations, making the concept of a Southern based and administered Black youth organization unique. Jackson, Strong, and Ashford felt that southerners needed an organization that represented their unique circumstances and understood the particularities of contemporary southern racial culture.

Ashford proposed the organization of a Southern Negro Youth Congress to Edward Strong, the National Negro Congress Youth Chairman. Strong, a Texarkana, Texas native, was the son of a Baptist minister. The family moved north to Flint, Michigan when Strong was twelve, by which point he knew “what it meant to pick a hundred pounds of cotton a day, and to have absorbed the feeling for the folkways of the

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Negro people—their music, their leaders, and the fervent oratory of the church.” While his family worked in Flint’s industries, Strong “absorbed the talk of organizing unions.”

Before entering college, Strong had founded a Junior NAACP branch and had won a college scholarship. He graduated from Central YMCA College in Chicago, a college-level program that grew out of YMCA business classes and eventually became Roosevelt University. He then became a youth leader at the Mount Olivet Baptist Church. In 1933, Strong attended the First International Youth Conference in Chicago and joined the Communist party shortly thereafter. After abandoning his path towards leadership in the Baptist church, he received a graduate degree in political science at Howard University. Though Ashford was the earliest proponent of a Southern Negro Youth Congress, Strong did most of the initial organizational work. He had planned to hold the first Southern Negro Youth Conference in November 1936, but postponed it to attend the World Youth Conference in Geneva, Switzerland that year. Strong passed the organizational responsibilities onto Jackson, who spent the summer of 1936 piecing together plans for the first conference of the Southern Negro Youth Congress.

The first All-Southern Negro Youth Conference was held on February 13 and 14, 1937—in honor of Frederick Douglass’s birthday—in Richmond, Virginia. Five hundred thirty four young men and women attended the conference. Delegates came from twenty-

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78 Ibid, 38.
79 Ibid. p 38-39.
80 Ibid.
three states, the Belgian Congo, and China, and represented 200,000 members from a large variety of religious, civic, fraternal, and political organizations.82

The organization established itself as “primarily concerned with the problems of black youth.” Yet, it was, “convinced that the problems of adults and youth in the South were substantially similar and the solutions for black and white youth were virtually the same. Cooperation and harmony were stressed throughout the conference.”83 The organization encouraged its new members and leaders to commit to making the South represent American ideals, rather than abandoning the difficult struggle there. In 1947, Organizational Secretary Florence Castile wrote that the delegates at the first SNYC conference were, “determined not to go to the crowded urban cities to try to compete for jobs in the North,” and that “they were persistent in their belief that the South, which was their home, must yield them a living, an education, full citizenship rights including the right to vote and the right to be free of terror.”84 At the first conference, Edward Strong gave a talk in which he emphasized the contrast between the “land of potential with plenty of science, natural resources and every possible equipment to place at the disposal of man” and the lack of legislation against lynching and poll taxes.85 The newly formed Southern Negro Youth Congress validated Black southerners’ hope that democracy could be fought for and won, even amid the woes of the Great Depression.

At the first SNYC conference, young Black Southerners challenged their country to deliver on the promise of equality and democracy that defined American political


83 Richards, 31.

84 Correspondence, 10/10/47 from Florence Castile to Johnnie A. Moore, Tuskegee Institute SNYC club president, Southern Negro Youth Congress Papers, Clubs and Councils, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

85 Richards, 32.
The organization represented a wide range of Black southerners from an array of economic backgrounds—from the land they cultivated but did not own to the miserable slums that were their homes; from the mine and mill that failed to provide livelihood to the professions for which they were qualified but unable to serve; from the prisons that held them unjustly to the fields where lynch mobs took justice into their own hands.

Young Black Southerners declared that the challenge of democracy was crucial to America’s standing in the world community. Equality and justice were not only imperative in the lives of young Black Southerners; they were vital to the stature of the nation in the eyes of the rest of the globe.86

These young Black southerners believed that, “we shall sweep away all obstacles, real and imaginary, and make for ourselves, and for America, a wonderful greatness, an expression of civilized humanity, at peace with itself, at peace with the world, a proof that humankind can achieve a new order.” In contrast to Marcus Garvey’s popular belief a decade and a half earlier that Black Americans should abandon hope in the United States and resettle in Africa, the SNYC’s founders believed that America, and the South in particular, did provide the framework for the equality and justice that United States democracy had not yet realized. According to the Proclamation of Southern Negro Youth, young Black Southerners held the same potential as the most noteworthy Black figures in history to make essential strides toward a new United States that fulfilled its

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86 Proclamation of Southern Negro Youth, ca. 1937, Southern Negro Youth Congress Papers, Publications, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University. The Proclamation of Southern Negro Youth was printed in several formats throughout the SNYC’s existence. In some instances, it was printed in shortened form to read like a manifesto. The full text is approximately four pages long.

From its inception, the Southern Negro Youth Congress sponsored, as the historian Robin D.G. Kelley states, “a politics of inclusion \textit{and} self-determination—a vision of interracial democracy combined with black militancy.”\footnote{Kelley, 212. Emphasis original.} The SNYC emphasized unity and racial pride as key components of social justice. The “Proclamation of Southern Negro Youth” addressed the tensions between young white and Black Southerners. It read, “These conditions are caused not by the many—but by the few, those who profit by pitting white labor against black labor to the harm of both.” The SNYC offered its “hand in warmest brotherhood” to young white Southerners, stating that the two could only better their conditions by working together.\footnote{Proclamation of Southern Negro Youth, ca. 1937, Southern Negro Youth Congress Papers, Publications, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.} But the organization also emphasized that race further compounded the problems of Black southerners, and set out to infuse political activism with racial pride and a sense that racial equality would benefit the entire nation.

As a part of the Popular Front, the SNYC included Communist leaders like Jackson who believed in a radical overhaul of the social and economic structures of the United States as a path to social justice and equality for Black Americans. But the organization also defined itself as nonpartisan. It included Black southerners who held a range of political viewpoints, from far-left Communists to followers of Booker T.
Washington. For Jackson, though he had been a member of the CPUSA since 1931, the SNYC’s political inclusiveness fostered his political maturation. His involvement with Richmond’s Black community, including his father’s progressive social circle, his mother’s dignified friends, his schoolmates, and impoverished tobacco workers led him away from Communist doctrine as dogma and toward a broader interpretation of its ideals. Though his CPUSA membership and leadership would outlast the SNYC’s existence by a half-century, leading the SNYC was the defining role of Jackson’s political life.

The SNYC structure included an Adult Advisory Board, Executive Board, Officers and Staff, SNYC clubs, affiliated clubs, and members at large. The organization earned nationwide credibility through its Adult Advisory Board. This group consisted of around thirty preeminent Black academics, activists, and professionals, ranging from the presidents of Southern Black colleges to NAACP leaders and lawyers. During the SNYC’s history, the Adult Advisory Board included the influential figures of W.E.B. Du Bois, Charlotte Hawkins Brown, Mary MacLeod Bethune, Mordecai Johnson, F.D. Patterson, Arthur Shores, and Charles Johnson. These advisors participated in the SNYC’s executive board meetings and provided budget approval, guidance, and encouragement, along with strong and respectable connections with the organizations that they represented. The Executive Board and Officers and Staff were responsible for issuing club charters and organizing all major functions of the SNYC. SNYC clubs

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90 The SNYC’s third conference program cover featured a photograph of Booker T. Washington, in a specific attempt to appeal to Black southerners who were put off by the organization’s more radical reputation. Leaders made an effort to include multiple political aspirations in the conference proceedings.

91 Various sources in the Southern Negro Youth Congress Papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

92 Dorothy Burnham, interviewed by Sara Rzeszutek, 23 January 2003, Brooklyn, NY.
existed within trade unions, YMCAs, YWCAs, colleges, high schools, and neighborhoods. Affiliated clubs were groups that already existed and wished to associate with the SNYC. Social clubs, athletic groups, school, church, and fraternal organizations comprised many of the SNYC’s affiliated clubs. Members at-large were individuals who wished to affiliate with the SNYC, but were not members of a club or an affiliate group. These branches of the organization combined to form the SNYC Community Council. SNYC leaders expected that delegates from each branch of the organization would gather at least once every two years at an All-Southern Negro Youth Conference, the organization’s “highest governing body.”

One of the SNYC’s first activities was the unionization of over five thousand Black female tobacco stemmers in Richmond, Virginia, the very group Jackson had greeted nightly as a child. Of the tobacco campaign, Augusta Strong wrote, “As a movement may reflect the image of the personalities who lead it, the passion and drive of the Negro youth movement of this period were mirrored in James Edward Jackson, the Richmond, Virginia youth, who inspired, and helped to achieve, the organization of the perennially exploited tobacco workers in his native city.” As one of the SNYC’s first efforts, Jackson advocated that the group work with the Congress for Industrial Organization (CIO) to organize Richmond’s tobacco workers into a union.

The deplorable conditions of Virginia’s tobacco workers were rooted in a long history of racial and economic oppression. By the early twentieth century, Black women

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in Virginia monopolized the stemming of tobacco. Tobacco rehandlers were 98 percent Black, and these workers were unable to advance to skilled labor positions because the tobacco industry “developed a dualistic structure in which black and white workers sought employment in separate, non-competing job classifications at differing rates of pay.”

To stem tobacco, a worker would fold the leaf in half and remove the stem. Efficient technology for tobacco stemming had not yet been developed. Workers in this occupation were paid based on the weight of the stems they had removed from the leaves. On average, tobacco stemmers earned a meager $6.40 per week, not nearly enough to make ends meet.

Management cared more about tobacco profits above the welfare of the workers. Factories seldom contained adequate dressing rooms or toilets. Factory windows were kept closed to retain moisture in the leaves, making the rooms extremely warm for the workers who had no choice but to wear clothes made from discarded burlap tobacco sacks. Without ventilation, the air was not breathable, and workers had to cover their faces with handkerchiefs to avoid inhaling dust. The humidity was unbearable, and the cruelty of the bosses only made the working conditions worse.

Bosses were particularly harsh on Black women workers, who comprised the majority of the lowest-paying, most grueling positions. As the historian Robert Korstad writes of tobacco strikes several years later in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, Black women were subjected to poor treatment on the basis of both race and gender. Foremen

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had “virtually no constraints when it came to black women.” They failed to allow regular breaks for the women, even if they were pregnant or menstruating, and regularly implemented speed-ups to increase production. As one worker known as Mama Harris put it, after she started work at the Export Leaf Tobacco Company, “It took me just one day to find out that preachers don’t know nothing about hell. They ain’t worked in no tobacco factory.” Although women comprised the vast majority of Virginia’s tobacco stemmers, the tobacco factories also employed elderly people and children as stemmers, and men as skilled laborers.

Many of the children who left school at an early age to provide their families with additional income by working in the tobacco industry were the offspring of adult tobacco workers. Jackson observed that the number of children who remained in Richmond’s Black schools was “reduced by the man’s deep pocket.” For these children, returning to school after they found a means for income in the tobacco industry was neither a priority nor an option. In 1912, the Tobacco Workers International Union of the American Federation of Labor (TWIU-AFL) had offered membership that would lead to improved wages and conditions, and by 1920, 3,500 workers had enrolled. However, membership meant little to the workers and conditions had not improved. By 1925, the Tobacco Workers International Union retained only one hundred members in Richmond.

98 Robert Rogers Korstad, Civil Rights Unionism, 38.
100 James E. Jackson, Jr., interview with Sara Rzeszutek, 12 December 2002, Brooklyn, NY. See also Writer’s Program, 340. For a detailed history of the unionization of Richmond tobacco workers and this series of strikes, see Richard Love, “In Defiance of Custom and Tradition.” Love argues that the Richmond strikes comprised an assault on the “structure and status quo of racial segregation,” led to the reification of racial lines within major labor unions, and challenged the exclusion of African American laborers from skilled ranks as mechanization isolated them at increasingly insufficient pay grades and poor labor conditions.
On April 16, 1937, a spontaneous walkout of unorganized workers at the Carrington and Michaux plant began in response to a work speed-up without a corresponding pay raise. The strikers petitioned the Richmond community for assistance in organizing and collective bargaining. For twenty-four hours, their plea went unanswered. The SNYC, which was in the beginning stages of working with the CIO, responded and hurriedly joined with a semi-organized Citizen’s Committee to help the strikers. Demands included wage increases, forty-hour workweeks, and recognition of the union. Without the assistance of the Tobacco Workers Industrial Union, the workers and the SNYC decided to form a new union, the Tobacco Stemmers and Laborers Industrial Union. Within forty-eight hours, dialogue began between the union leaders and the tobacco bosses and the contract was renegotiated just four days after the strike began. The quick settlement of the spur-of-the-moment strike at Carrington and Michaux reflected management’s desire to get the factory running as expeditiously as possible. Unaccustomed to worker defiance, factory managers were not willing to risk the cost of a long strike, and, as the historian Richard Love argues, the strikers’ “courage and determination had cost C&M little in terms of dollars…but represented a major challenge to the established sensibilities of Richmond’s white employers.”

The Carrington and Michaux strike initiated a series of strikes in Richmond’s tobacco industry that extended into 1938, and the SNYC remained involved in worker organization. By the end of April 1937, twenty-two year old Jackson, along with Francis Grandison, a twenty-one year old from Virginia, and C. Columbus Alston, a twenty-three year old SNYC member who had been an autoworker and union organizer in Detroit,

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101 Love, 25.
103 Love, 29-30.
enrolled over five thousand stemmers into the Tobacco Stemmers and Laborers Industrial Union, newly an affiliate of the CIO. Jackson became the educational director for the unionization effort, while Grandison worked as the business agent for the union and Alston was the union’s main organizer. The workers who enrolled were impressed by the Black youths organizing them. Whereas the segregated American Federation of Labor, from which the CIO had separated, had previously neglected to make union membership meaningful for Black workers, Jackson and the SNYC promptly promised that conditions would change for the stemmers affiliated with the CIO.

Strikes followed at I.N. Vaughn and Company, Larus Brothers, the Tobacco By-Product and Chemical Corporation and at the Export Leaf Tobacco Company. The strikes typically resulted in a higher wage, paid overtime, and better conditions. The Carrington and Michaux victory had inspired workers. In the three months following the spontaneous walkout, strikes at three factories resulted in settlements, and workers lost less than four total weeks of work. Love writes, “Whether this spoke to the union’s power, or simply to the fact that wages for stemmers and laborers had been so low and business so good that it cost the companies relatively little to settle the strikes, was open to question.” In spite of this, the strikes grew progressively more complicated and drawn out. As the union effort expanded in Richmond, the divisions between unskilled Black laborers and skilled white laborers increased. The Tobacco Workers Industrial Union (AFL) and the Tobacco Stemmers and Laborers Industrial Union (CIO) competed for the right to control the union at Larus Brothers, and segregation intensified the

105 Writer’s program, 340.
106 Writers Program; Love.
107 Love, 33.
struggle. In addition, as the strikes progressed, stemming was becoming a less stable segment of the tobacco industry. The industry expanded, but as technology improved, fewer stemmers were needed, and this shift meant that the proportion of Black women working in Richmond’s tobacco industry was shrinking.\textsuperscript{108}

National politics made the situation in Richmond’s tobacco industry even more complex. In June 1938, in the midst of the series of tobacco strikes, Congress passed the Wages and Hours Bill, a part of the Fair Labor Standards Act, which provided for a forty-cent per hour minimum wage. The Fair Labor Standards Act also outlawed child labor.\textsuperscript{109} Out of fear that this would significantly increase, or even double, the price of tobacco, Tobacco Manufacturers’ Association president E. J. O’Brien called for a campaign to educate the public about the “humane paternalism” of the tobacco industry. He argued that increasing tobacco wages to ten dollars per week would prevent the industry from “providing ‘a place for’” elderly, sickly, and disabled people to work. Upon close examination into the industry by the union, however, the workers discovered that the vast majority of tobacco workers were adults in their prime who received less than two percent of the tobacco profits.\textsuperscript{110}

The strike at the Export Leaf Tobacco Factory started on August 1, 1938 lasted for eighteen days. The company’s stemmers were the lowest paid in Richmond. One striker pointed out the wage disparity in a sign that read, “EXPORT LEAF’S VICE PRES WAS PAID $34,047 A YR. WE STRIKE FOR $10 A WEEK.”\textsuperscript{111} At the outset of the strike, the powerful factory, which was part of the Brown and Williamson Company, a

\textsuperscript{108} Love, 35-36.
\textsuperscript{110} Writers’ program, 342.
\textsuperscript{111} Jackson, “A New Deal for Tobacco Workers,” 323.
subsidiary of the British-American Tobacco Trust, threatened to close its doors and reopen elsewhere. However, with the public’s support, the strikers won pay raises, union recognition, and improved conditions. The tobacco strikes of 1937-1938 was the first major series of strikes in Virginia since 1905 and the first major victory for organized Black labor in Virginia. Richmond Urban League director Wiley Hall considered the CIO campaign “the most significant thing that has happened to Richmond Negroes since Emancipation.”

The tobacco workers’ successes through their new union led other working-class laborers to express solidarity. In the Export Leaf strike, two hundred members of the predominantly white female Amalgamated Clothing Workers joined the Black tobacco workers on the picket line and pledged fifty dollars to help the strikers. In addition, the Newspaper Guild, the American Federation of Teachers, and the International Ladies Garment Workers Union offered their assistance to Richmond’s striking tobacco workers. Jackson explained, “the Black workers were the pace setters in the struggle. They had nothing to lose, everything to gain and very little to defend … this was the base of their militancy.” Jackson recognized that the distinct racial separation and the gendered division of labor were deliberate. He noted that, “it was not accidental on the part of the [bosses] to utilize the racial factor to ensure against the unification of the working class.” The addition of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers to the Export Leaf Tobacco Factory picket line illustrated to Jackson the extent of labor exploitation and

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112 Writer’s Program, 341.
113 Ibid, 342.
114 Love, 38.
115 James E. Jackson, Jr., interview with Sara Rzeszutek, 12 December 2002, Brooklyn, NY.
solidified his belief that unity among workers of all races and across gender lines could lead to dramatic change.\textsuperscript{116}

Jackson’s understanding of the implications of gender in racial and economic exploitation reflected both his politics and his upbringing in Richmond, along with the cultural backdrop of the New Deal. When the strikes began, he observed that the workers he watched pass his father’s pharmacy throughout his boyhood had begun, “appreciating…that the power was in the muscle and mind of the workers.”\textsuperscript{117} Jackson saw the strength of these workers as both mental determination and physical fortitude.

The image of a muscular, “manly worker,” propagandized during the New Deal, represented an ideal of work as both gendered and physical. The historian Barbara Melosh describes the image of a muscular worker as a cultural response to political strife; “a reformation of masculinity that both revised and conserved older representations of class, race, and gender.”\textsuperscript{118} In New Deal era public art, sculptures and paintings offered muscle-bound men as reassurance that, in spite of massive economic strife, gendered norms would prevail and preserve the nation. As Melosh notes, “In the face of widespread unemployment and changes in work that threatened traditional skills, public art presented work as a domain of male control and camaraderie.”\textsuperscript{119}

Yet the Richmond strikes proved this gendered representation to be inaccurate. Jackson described one of the workers, Mama Harris, as an articulate “spokesman of the rank and file…in a class by herself.” Her husband was of powerful, muscular stature with “big arms,” a quintessential “manly worker.” But he often sat quietly aside while

\textsuperscript{116} James E. Jackson, Jr., interview with Sara Rzeszutek, 25 September 2002, Brooklyn, NY.
\textsuperscript{117} James E. Jackson, Jr., interview with Sara Rzeszutek, 25 September 2002, Brooklyn, NY.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 159.
his wife’s loud voice rallied the crowd. For Jackson, Mrs. Harris debunked the popular image of the “manly worker.” The Harris couple provided Jackson with an example of the power of muscle and mind in defeating exploitation, and reversed popular representations of gender and power.

By the time the tobacco strikes ended, they had helped the SNYC establish itself as an influential force in the South. The success of the strikes was a victory for the Popular Front movement, and Communist activists like Jackson earned the respect of those they represented. In the 1940s, Raleigh-Durham’s tobacco industry followed Richmond with a series of strikes that merged labor concerns with civil rights. The SNYC’s earlier campaign had led the way, and for Jackson was the culmination of his upbringing, education, and young adulthood in Richmond.

In the midst of the Richmond strikes, the SNYC forged ahead with its Popular Front mission. The second All-Southern Negro Youth Conference took place in Chattanooga, Tennessee, from April 1-3, 1938. Depression-era economics dominated the conference program, with special attention to interracial working-class unity as a key means for advancing a civil rights agenda. The conference emphasized, “Many of our problems, those of health, family life, religion, education and economic security are problems common to ALL youth. The economic and cultural level of the South as a whole can be raised to a position of equality with the rest of the nation only by joint co-operation between Negro and white people.” For the SNYC, the unification of Black and white working-class youth was a means to economic security. The organization’s

120 James E. Jackson, Jr., interview with Sara Rzeszutek, 25 September 2002, Brooklyn, NY.
122 Invitation to Second All-Southern Negro Youth Conference, Southern Negro Youth Congress Papers, Conferences, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
victories in the Richmond tobacco strikes demonstrated that its methods produced results
and that its goals could be reached. The SNYC entered its second year on a record of
success and looked to broaden its agenda.

In 1938, the SNYC also began to give more explicit attention to international
politics. As a Communist-influenced organization, the SNYC went against the
isolationist grain of late-1930s American life. Most Americans opposed intervention in
foreign affairs during this era for several reasons. Homegrown anti-Semitism helped
Americans turn a blind eye to Adolf Hitler’s growing Nazi aggression, the economic
crisis turned the nation inward, and the memories of the horrors of World War I loomed
large.123 For many African Americans, the specter of World War I was particularly
resonant. Blacks had believed that they would win the respect of the nation in the Great
War, that “By showing themselves good citizens, they would win the sympathy of the
whites and gain all the things which they had been deprived.”124 Instead, on returning
from war Black veterans confronted some of the most virulent and violent racism in
history.

Most SNYC leaders did not envision U.S. involvement in a total war, but believed
that the U.S. needed to stay attuned to international affairs and take a clear position on
injustices perpetrated by fascist regimes. War was brewing within Europe and China,
and conflicts were extending into other regions, as well. In 1935, the Italian Army
invaded Ethiopia to avenge a four-decades-old defeat that kept a sole African nation from

123 See Laura McEnaney, “He-Men and Christian Mothers: The America First Movement and the Gendered
Dinnerstein, Antisemitism in America, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); David M. Kennedy,
Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945, (New York: Oxford
124 C.L.R. James, “Why Negroes Should Oppose the War,” in James, George Breitman, Edgar Keemer, and
the ravages of colonialism. In response to overseas conflict, the Roosevelt administration passed Neutrality Acts in 1935, 1937, and 1939. The Neutrality Acts forbade the U.S. government from providing aid to any “belligerent” nations and implemented trade embargoes. Roosevelt invoked the Act immediately to bar aid to Ethiopia and Italy. But African Americans saw hope for global Black independence in Ethiopia’s efforts to hold off colonization and wanted to help. They rallied across the nation, set up the Provisional Committee for the Defense of Ethiopia, and even tried to volunteer to fight on behalf of Ethiopia. Because the Neutrality Act forbade enlistment in foreign war, African Americans rallied to send money instead.125

The next year, civil war broke out in Spain after Republicans defeated the conservative government in a popular election and Generalissimo Francisco Franco, a right-wing nationalist, led a coup. Roosevelt did not invoke the Neutrality Act in this instance, but generally discouraged Americans from participating. Nonetheless, sympathetic leftists and African Americans who had protested the Italian invasion of Ethiopia and felt a need to participate organized “Abraham Lincoln Brigades” and traveled to Spain to fight. Because the war in Spain was civil, and not a competition between two nations, the Neutrality Act had no jurisdiction. These events influenced the SNYC in the late 1930s, and helped the organization craft its position on international conflict as total war approached.126

In addition, Popular Front policy reflected the Soviet Union’s opposition to and anxiety about fascism. Tensions between the Soviet Union and Western Europe increased as Nazism began to consume Eastern Europe. Britain had attempted to quell the danger Hitler posed and tried to calm the growing Nazi regime through its policy of appeasement. In 1938, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain agreed to recognize Italy’s authority in Ethiopia to preserve peace in the Mediterranean and allowed Germany to conquer the Sudetenland in order to avoid further conflict in Eastern Europe. The U.S. maintained its isolationist stance and applauded Britain’s peacekeeping measures, but isolation and neutrality abetted fascism’s expansion. The Soviet Union anticipated the consequences of spreading Nazism and expressed frustration at the appeasement policy coming from the west. Josef Stalin rebuffed Britain and France’s efforts to form an alliance in part because Germany’s uncontested expansion into the Sudetenland threatened Russia’s security and stability. Instead of putting confidence in Britain and France, Stalin began to pave his own path in dealing with Hitler’s aggression.\footnote{Kennedy, Freedom from Fear, 418-425.}

For Communists and leftists in the United States, the events of the late 1930s spelled impending disaster. Popular Front leaders across the country took political cues from the Soviet Union and applied them to a United States context, articulating an anti-war position that did not isolate or neutralize the U.S. in international affairs. At the second SNYC conference, leaders juxtaposed a desire for peace with anxiety that the world was heading in the opposite direction. They wrote:

Our bodies and our souls are destined for higher things than cannon fodder in banker-made wars. We see the world today careening on a precipice and about to lurch over in a gulf of destruction and chaos...We must take our stand against the fascist bandits who hold Ethiopia in bondage, and who now seek to march steadily through Spain, China, and Austria. With the world asking, “Where will
they strike next?” we join our voices with all those who would preserve peace and democracy in saying: “They have gone far enough. They must be stopped by the aroused sentiment of the people of the world, and by the concerted actions of all nations and peoples who still hold democracy dear.”

The SNYC leaders echoed Du Bois’s World War I article, “The African Roots of War,” by deeming that the approaching conflict was the will of capitalists. Those engaged in competition over access to resources and capital used international conflict as a path to profit without concern for the nations that would be trampled as collateral damage. The SNYC asserted that local struggles and international strife were interconnected. The organization’s leaders believed that exploited workers and oppressed African Americans would pay the cost of war while capitalists reaped the benefits.

Shortly after the second conference, Jackson took a leave-of-absence from the SNYC to pursue an opportunity as a researcher for Gunnar Myrdal’s study, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*. Jackson left home and toured the South, interviewing Blacks across the region. He worked under Ralph Bunche, an ardent anticommunist. But Bunche was open to Jackson’s interpretations, and Jackson’s Communist insight “provided information on labor and radical activities that escaped the notice of most political scientists.” The experience was invaluable for Jackson but the most significant part of his time as a researcher did not become a part of Myrdal’s work. On assignment in Tennessee, Jackson visited Fisk University, where he met a graduate student in sociology named Esther Cooper.

Cooper, an Arlington, Virginia native, and Jackson were cut from nearly identical cloth. Cooper’s mother, Esther Irving Cooper, instilled in her three daughters, Kathryn,
Esther, and Paulina, an awareness of the world around them. The elder Esther Cooper and her husband, Army officer George Posea Cooper, lived in relative comfort and afforded their daughters opportunities that many Black children growing up in the Jim Crow South were denied. The family spent summers in Sea Isle City, New Jersey and visited family in Ohio regularly, where the children experienced integration and equality unavailable at home.

Esther Irving grew up in Cleveland, Ohio, where she was born in 1881. As a young adult, she entered a business college and later won a position as a secretary to Ohio’s first Black state representative, Harry C. Smith. Smith was a Black journalist who founded *The Cleveland Gazette* and won election to the Ohio State Legislature in 1893. After leaving Cleveland, Irving made her way to Kentucky, where she worked as a secretary to Nannie Helen Burroughs at the Auxiliary to the National Baptist Convention in Louisville. The connection with Burroughs proved promising, as the two became lifelong friends. Irving later taught at Burroughs’ National Training School for Women and Girls in Washington, D.C. She left Louisville for Washington, D.C. to pursue a career as a secretary in the Department of Agriculture. There, she met Lieutenant George Posea Cooper. The two married on September 10, 1913 and had three daughters.

Esther Irving Cooper was a quintessential Black woman of the Progressive Era, and she strove to raise daughters who were savvy, independent, and smart. As a Parent Teacher Association leader in Arlington, Irving Cooper ensured that her girls received a solid educational foundation in spite of the poor state of Virginia’s segregated schools. Though she was dedicated to improving Southern schools, she prioritized the quality of

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her daughters’ education over her politics. All three Cooper children spent some time living with an uncle in Washington, D.C. to attend school at the prestigious Dunbar High School. Irving Cooper was active in the St. John’s Baptist Church and participated in many of its outreach programs, including the Lott Carey Foreign Mission Society. She also helped to found and lead the Jenny Dean Community Center Association, Inc., which bought land on which to develop YMCAs. The Jenny Dean group organized in 1931 in response to “a need for organized recreation for the youth of the community and for the extended services of a community center.” Most significantly, in 1940 she founded and served as the president of the Arlington, Virginia NAACP. Prior to the Arlington chapter’s founding, she had long supported the Washington, D.C. branch. Irving Cooper taught her daughters by example that it was possible and necessary for them, as Black Americans and as young women, to pursue racial justice and political rights. Her middle daughter and namesake fused her mother’s influence with her own experiences in her life of activism.

Born on August 21, 1917, Esther Victoria Cooper took her mother’s instructions to heart and excelled in school. After graduating from Dunbar High School in Washington, DC, she enrolled in Oberlin College in Ohio in 1934, where she was one of three Black students on campus. Following her mother’s lead, she was a pacifist at Oberlin, but her ideals were beginning to shift. She was acquainted with several students at Oberlin who had volunteered and died in the fight against Franco during the Spanish Civil War. To Cooper, Franco represented an evil that needed to be defeated at any cost, and she began to rethink her commitment to pacifism during this time.132 She also

131 “Mrs. Esther I. Cooper dies, dynamic in NAACP, church,” Esther Irving Cooper papers.
became interested in Dolores “La Pasionaria” Ibarruri, a Spanish Communist, because she was “not just a follower or leader of women. She was the revolution.”\textsuperscript{133} Ibarruri gained recognition for her efforts to inspire Republican troops in the Spanish Civil War. She also encouraged Spanish women to get involved in the fight against Franco.\textsuperscript{134}

As a Masters student in the Sociology Department at Fisk University from 1938 to 1940, Cooper gained her first exposure to the depths of poverty in the South. While she had a clear understanding of segregation from her childhood in Arlington, her parents shielded her from the most abject poverty. But in graduate school, she recalled, “I lived in a Methodist settlement house in Nashville, and worked with the families who lived in the settlement house. And that was the worst poverty I’d ever seen, and I knew there was poverty in Arlington, but I didn’t know it that well. It was just something that really hit me.”\textsuperscript{135} At this point, Cooper’s communism began to take shape. Some of her strongest political influences “were radical professors, most of whom had come to Fisk from the North because they wanted to make a contribution, really, to the education of black youth.”\textsuperscript{136} She recalls that professors provided her with Marxist and Communist literature and newspapers, including the CPUSA’s main organ, \textit{The Daily Worker}.

She joined the Communist Party before graduating from Fisk, but kept her new political affiliation private for fear that open Party membership would appear to compromise her intellectual independence. Her hesitation to join and then to disclose her membership was in part a reaction her earlier commitment to pacifism, and in part a

\textsuperscript{134} Temma Kaplan, \textit{Taking Back the Streets: Women, Youth, and Direct Democracy}, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Yates, \textit{Mississippi to Madrid}.
\textsuperscript{135} Esther Cooper Jackson, interview with Sara Rzeszutek, 25 September 2002, Brooklyn, NY.
\textsuperscript{136} Esther Cooper Jackson, interview with Sara Rzeszutek, 12 December 2002, Brooklyn, NY.
response to the specific circumstances under which she joined. As a woman in her early twenties, her sense of herself as a political person was still taking shape, and when a professor she respected asked her to sign up for Party membership in the presence of her advisor, she decided to join. She recalled that she did not feel pressured to sign up. Nonetheless, her subsequent unease about the situation reflects her thoughtfulness about her new affiliation, given her college pacifism.

Much the way Jackson’s involvement in the Richmond tobacco strikes fused his upbringing, education, and politics, Cooper’s Master’s thesis in Sociology crystallized her developing politics and her intellectualism into a cohesive ideology. Though she had not seen much poverty as a child, she observed that nearly all of the poor Black women she encountered worked as domestic servants in the homes of whites. “The Negro Woman Domestic Worker in Relation to Trade Unionism,” her thesis, argued, “the problems faced by Negro women domestic workers are responsive to amelioration through trade unions.” She acknowledged that unionizing these women was a difficult task because of racism and the failure of the American Federation of Labor to make an effort to organize domestic and agricultural workers. Her work, which drew on labor statistics, correspondence with domestics, interviews, union materials, and a comparison with labor conditions in Scandinavia, interrogated the significance of race, class, and gender in shaping labor conditions. Cooper suggested that unionization would improve not only the conditions of toil for domestic workers, but would also assuage some of the

137 McDuffie, 294.
138 McDuffie 296-297.
unique difficulties of working in a private home, including sexual harassment and violence.\(^{139}\)

By looking specifically at Black domestic servants, Cooper contested a key component of New Deal labor politics. In 1935, President Franklin Roosevelt signed the Social Security Act into law. The act functioned as an economic safety net for workers across the nation by providing old age assistance, unemployment insurance, and benefits for dependent children. But Southerners had a hand in writing provisions into the act that prevented the federal government from “[interfering] with the way white southerners dealt with ‘the Negro question.’”\(^{140}\) Southern lawmakers insisted that farm workers and maids, two occupations that were almost exclusively Black, were excluded from receiving the benefits of the act. These lawmakers codified their regional way of life into national law, retaining a firm grip on their white supremacy for generations to come by ensuring that poor and working-class Blacks could not collect old age pensions under the new Social Security benefits.\(^{141}\) Minimum wage law included some of the same exclusions.

The law, in essence, defined farm and domestic work as a status, not an occupation worthy of recognition. Cooper’s thesis suggested that organizing domestic workers into labor unions would help to redefine Black women as employees who were embedded in the national economy, both through their own income and by allowing the white women who employed them the leisure time to consume. Her thesis was grounded in both the development of New Deal liberalism and her Marxist perspective. Esther

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\(^{139}\) Esther Cooper, The Negro Woman Domestic Worker in Relation to Trade Unionism, M.A. Thesis for Fisk University, Jackson papers, Box 9 Folder 32.

\(^{140}\) Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth Century America*, 44.

\(^{141}\) Ibid.
Cooper merged her mother’s progressivism and her generation’s Popular Front ideals with New Deal liberal politics.

When Jackson arrived at Fisk in 1939, he and Cooper were immediately drawn to one another. Although they were each seeing other people at the time, the two went on a date to the movies. They felt such a connection that it did not matter that Jackson slept through most of the film. Jackson wrote to Ed Strong, “I remember her with a persistency that’s altogether pleasant…sweet, unaffected, clean, open-faced innocence, like a bit of sunshine imbedded in one’s heart, as it were.” When Jackson left Fisk, he and Cooper began corresponding regularly. Love letters came for Cooper on Tobacco Stemmers and Laborers Industrial Union letterhead, and she promptly corrected his typos.

In 1939, Esther Cooper attended the Birmingham conference of the Southern Negro Youth Congress and was impressed by the organization’s seriousness and by the members’ courage. In 1940, Ed Strong and Jackson, who had finished his roughly one-year stint as a researcher for Myrdal, invited her to join the staff in Birmingham. Cooper, who had also been invited to pursue a Ph.D. at the University of Chicago under the famed sociologist Robert Park, faced a dilemma similar to Jackson’s decision between pursuing pharmacy or activism. When she considered whether to follow her path to academia or accept the SNYC invitation, Cooper turned to her mother for advice. Her mother agreed that the opportunity to change the South was important. She decided to work for the SNYC. Her decision was mostly political, but her romantic involvement

142 Cooper Jackson, 26; McDuffie, 305.
143 James E. Jackson to Esther Cooper, undated, World War II Correspondence, James and Esther Cooper Jackson Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University, New York, NY.
144 Cooper Jackson, This Is My Husband; Esther Cooper Jackson, interview with Sara Rzeszutek, 25 September 2002, Brooklyn, NY.
with James Jackson was also a factor.\textsuperscript{145} She became one of a handful of paid staff members and an elected officer after a summer spent registering voters.\textsuperscript{146} Cooper never regretted her choice to abandon a promising path toward an academic career. She wrote of her time in Birmingham, “The fact that salaries were small and irregular never once dampened our spirits or blunted the ardor in our enthusiasm.”\textsuperscript{147} She also became the embodiment of the organization’s position on women’s leadership.

Though the organization was not immune from some sexism, most of the men in the SNYC consistently pressed for the full participation of women in leadership roles and speaking positions. Many of the men who had families also participated in housework and child care.\textsuperscript{148} While she was a member of the organization, Cooper observed that, “Women were promoted on an equal basis. In fact, some of us that didn’t particularly want to speak were…[told by] people like Edward Strong, who always called me ‘Cooper,’ [that] we weren’t to be there just to run the mimeograph machine and hand out things but get up and speak and organize.”\textsuperscript{149} The SNYC’s position on women’s leadership derived from an interpretation of Marxism that required full inclusion of women as a component of the struggle for social justice.\textsuperscript{150} The SNYC men, “read Engels’ *The Origin of Family* and took a Marxist position on women’s involvement, and

\textsuperscript{145} Kelley, 205.
\textsuperscript{146} Esther and James Jackson: memories of the Southern Negro Youth Congress, Esther Cooper Jackson and James E. Jackson, Jr., interview with James Vernon Hatch 1992, Brooklyn, NY.
\textsuperscript{147} Cooper Jackson, 26.
\textsuperscript{148} Kelley, 206. See also Esther Cooper Jackson, interview with Sara Rzeszutek, 25 September 2002, Brooklyn, NY.
they were extraordinarily different and advanced in their thinking."\textsuperscript{151} James Jackson, of course, grew up surrounded by models of female leadership in many forms, and he brought that perspective to his relationship with Esther Cooper.

The couple’s political and intellectual foundations brought them together, and set the stage for their love and their activism. On May 8, 1941 Esther Cooper and James Jackson married in Bessemer, Alabama. Unlike many radical couples who forsook marriage in favor of a non-institutionalized romantic commitment, Cooper and Jackson felt it was important to have a codified union.\textsuperscript{152} Still, Cooper, who is recorded as “Ester Copper” on her marriage certificate, elected to keep her maiden name as an expression of her independence. Almost immediately thereafter, Jackson left for a two-week trip to New Orleans for SNYC work, and Cooper set straight to work as the SNYC’s new Administrative Secretary.\textsuperscript{153}

As Cooper and Jackson began to build the foundations of their marriage, the shaky remains of global stability crumbled. The pair of activists remained devoted as the SNYC adapted its mission to fit the changing international context. As the organization matured into a seasoned front for social justice, Cooper and Jackson gained experiences and insight that contributed to their developing political ideologies. The couple prepared to face a world at war with confidence in their convictions, their plans, and each other.

\textsuperscript{153} Esther Cooper Jackson interviews with author; McDuffie, 313; Lewis, \textit{W.E.B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919-1963}. 
June 16, 1945 was a dull, hot, and sticky day along the Ledo Road in Burma. Corporal James E. Jackson, Jr. sat down in his barrack to write a letter to his wife in Birmingham, Alabama. Several pages passed as Jackson commented on the Communist Party, USA’s debate over whether to expel Earl Browder for suggesting that communism and capitalism could peacefully coexist. Then, in a moment of self-reflection, Jackson realized that his letter did not quite offer his wife the affection she might need to sustain interest in her husband while he was overseas. Jackson did typically write political letters, and it was not uncommon for him to receive similar political letters from his wife. Still, he found humor in the nature of his marriage. Did his wife ever just wish he would send her a flowery note, free from the world’s drama, he wondered. “Politics, politics, politics!!!” Jackson joked, “‘What a lover,’ you must say, ‘he quotes Marx on the class struggle and other girls get Keats and Shelly and Browning on ‘June Moon’s’ and stuff…Whatta dope!’ (Smiles!)”

When Esther Cooper received the letter, she was probably too busy to have spent much time on poetry. Cooper was serving as the Executive Secretary of the Southern Negro Youth Congress during the World War II years. Her busy position entailed endless committee meetings, travel, investigations, budgeting, publishing organizational materials, and keeping up with the many SNYC councils and affiliate groups throughout the South, all for very little money. In the midst of political discussion, planning an

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1 James Jackson (JJ) to Esther Cooper (EC), 16 June 45. James and Esther Cooper Jackson Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University.
application for a Rosenwald fellowship, reporting on a new Alabama law to force prospective voters to interpret the Constitution, and an update on their daughter, Harriet Dolores, Cooper found a moment to reply to her husband’s kidding. Cooper wrote, “Yes, I do like Shelly, Browning, and Keats like other girls but please don’t slow up on the politics. I’d rather discuss everything with you than anyone in the world.”

In World War II, the combination of politics and romance was integral to sustaining Cooper and Jackson’s relationship over time and distance.

This chapter examines the interplay of love and activism in Cooper and Jackson’s marriage during the World War II years. Southern Negro Youth Congress work, Army service, Marxist ideology and activism were infused in the couple’s family life. The way Cooper and Jackson interpreted, cultivated, and maneuvered through the intersections of personal and political life during World War II sheds light on how larger political changes affected individuals and families, and ultimately helps to explain the ways in which the Black freedom movement adapted to a changing world. As the U.S. relationship with the Soviet Union shifted between alliance and animosity, the national discourse on permissible social justice activism changed as well and reshaped the fundamental structure of the struggle for Black civil rights. World War II also elicited questions about the benefits of patriotism for Black Americans fighting to preserve a segregated democracy. As they gained exposure to a wider world in conflict and as their family grew, Cooper and Jackson’s personal and political priorities matured and their activism reflected their wartime experiences. During the war, Cooper and Jackson prepared for a postwar life together where they could continue to be active in mainstream civil rights work while retaining their Popular Front ideals. In spite of the devastating

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2 EC to JJ, 28 June 1945.
and difficult times they would face in the early Cold War, the way Cooper and Jackson imagined their future during World War II helped them to carve out individual niches in the Black freedom movement without compromising their ideological integrity.

Because Cooper and Jackson were only married for about two busy years before Jackson was drafted into the Army, the couple crafted their radical political marriage largely through correspondence during the three-year period of separation. During these years, Cooper was able to thoroughly cultivate her independence within her marriage, and assert herself against the common assumption that a woman would have to choose between her career and her love. Over the same time, Jackson had the opportunity to reconcile any internalized expectations he held for a traditional marriage with both his deep belief in female equality and the pride he took in his wife’s career and ambition. All of these dimensions of the couple’s politics and relationship must be understood as products of and factors in their love for each other. The couple used the context of war to define their marriage alongside their increased exposure to internationalism and Southern Negro Youth Congress activism on the home front.

The SNYC remained the couple’s main outlet for political activism. As a Popular Front organization, the SNYC’s political trajectory in the early stages of war followed the Communist Party line. In response to the Soviet Union’s entry into the Nazi-Soviet Pact on August 28, 1939, the SNYC argued that U.S. assistance to Britain would jeopardize the autonomy of the world’s only socialist nation. By the end of 1940, efforts to maintain

peace through appeasement were falling apart, and the United States began to plan to provide military equipment to Britain. The Roosevelt administration designed the Lend-Lease program to be an “arsenal of democracy” that would serve to buttress the barrier that Britain and its colonies built between fascist regimes and the Americas.  

In an *S.N.Y.C. News* bulletin printed in January 1941, SNYC leaders referred to the Lend-Lease program as a “war-mongering” effort to be “a co-partner of Britain in an imperialist adventure for the redivision of the world which would leave the U.S. monopolists in the dominant position.” In this period, the Communist Party lost popularity as it appeared aligned with Hitler, but the SNYC did not suffer in the same way. The organization kept its constituency by recognizing and emphasizing that the substance of an antiwar philosophy did not need to be directly linked with Soviet influence.

Leaders explained how their position coalesced with the interests of the South’s Black youth and working class citizens. After addressing the inconsistency of Roosevelt’s defense of democracy abroad through support of Britain—a country whose vast empire oppressed and exploited Africans and Indians—the article continued:

Roosevelt can speak of defending democracy abroad when 10,000,000 adults in our own Southland are voteless, when the spectra of the lynch rope yet waves over the heads of the Negro people and working men of the South; when political bosses … rest like ulcers on our body politic … when 9,000,000 able bodied Americans walk the streets of the nation in a vain search for jobs; when our so-called Citizen’s Army relegates Negro youth to the most menial tasks; when the Navy and Air Corps refuse to admit Negroes, when the great armament aircraft industries refuse to hire Negroes and one third of a nation is still “ill-housed, ill-clad, and ill-fed.”

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6 Ibid.
The SNYC’s interpretation of Roosevelt’s contradictory policies linked political tensions at home and abroad. Though the SNYC’s view of the conflict was influenced by the CPUSA and Popular Front ideology, their antiwar sentiment remained aligned with the isolationism of the majority in the United States. The SNYC’s economic arguments were still palatable for a population of Black and white citizens fighting the Great Depression, even though the Communist Party lost much of its appeal in building an alliance with Nazi Germany.

When Germany invaded the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, the SNYC shifted its focus from ways in which a war would perpetuate the oppression of Black citizens to how the struggle against global fascism would aid oppressed people of color across the globe. The connections among the different forms of racial exploitation remained a prevalent theme for the SNYC in the World War II period. James Jackson expressed SNYC opinion when he wrote that young men should be enrolled in the military for the greater benefit of oppressed people worldwide. He argued:

This is a World Wide struggle, a Total War between the new forces of Barbarism and World Slavery—represented by the Hitler-Hiroshito-Mussolini Axis and the freedom loving peoples of the World as represented by the United Nations. This is a struggle between freedom and slavery; between civilization and savagery … ALL MANKIND includes those nations and peoples who already enjoy considerable democratic rights as well as the ‘subject’ peoples who have yet to win full suffrage rights, such as the Negro people in the South, the people of India, Africa, the conquered countries…”

Jackson highlighted the connections between the South and other parts of the world through oppressed people’s common lack of a right to a voice in government. In this letter, Jackson and the SNYC proposed that winning this voice and defeating oppression entailed military participation in worldwide political struggles.

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7 James E. Jackson, Jr. to Sherman Williams, 17 September 1942, Southern Negro Youth Congress Papers, Correspondence, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
Gender equality also remained an essential component of the SNYC’s agenda during the war. The SNYC urged women to become “militant and able leaders in the youth movement,” to fight poll-taxes and segregation, and to unite with “white women who believe in democracy and who support the rights of Negroes in the United States.” SNYC leaders maintained that “on through the history of our country, Negro women have been ever faithful and brilliant leaders … Negro women want peace and security.”8 Throughout the war, women comprised approximately half of the SNYC’s leadership.

The SNYC’s goals during World War II aligned with Black Americans across the nation in expressing loyalty, patriotism, and enthusiasm for the cause of global democracy. In a 1942 report, SNYC leaders affirmed that its constituencies were loyal to wartime causes, that they had “traditionally been partisans of democracy” because democratic ideals offered a solution to their own racial struggles. The report continued, “Our people have always been ardent anti-fascists because they saw in the obnoxious race theories and brazen acts of uncivilized [sic] which characterized the Axis powers a threat to themselves and all minority and disadvantaged people.”9 But the report noted that these same African Americans hesitated to express this sentiment because of “the thousands of adverse circumstances that prevail in the every day life of Negro youth simply because of the color of their skin.”10

To the SNYC, patriotism in wartime was paramount in its campaigns to support the war effort and build racial equality. In 1943, Organizational Secretary Louis Burnham delivered an address on “Wings over Jordan,” a CBS sponsored Black radio

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9 Report of 1942 conference in Tuskegee, Southern Negro Youth Congress Papers, Conferences, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
10 Ibid.
Burnham was a Barbados native who was raised in New York City and had graduated from Hunter College. Like Cooper and Jackson, he was inspired to become an activist after college and moved to Birmingham with his wife, Dorothy, to join the SNYC. In his address, Burnham discussed the pervasive image of war in the South. He stated that any student was “likely to witness in front of his school building an Army jeep populated with soldiers from a nearby camp…He may talk to the soldiers…In all of this he finds himself drawn closer to the war effort, he finds added stimulation for the purchase of war stamps and bonds.”

According to Burnham, purchasing war stamps and bonds represented “unusual sacrifices and small acts of self-denial” through which Black youth who were not enlisted or drafted into army service could participate in the war effort.

SNYC leaders organized a number of ways for Black Southerners to understand and engage with the war effort. For instance, leaders urged members to see the film *The Negro Soldier*. Released in 1943 by the War Department, the propaganda film glorified African American military participation in United States wars in an effort to recruit new soldiers. In the film, military segregation is a clear fact, though it is presented without commentary.

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12 “Address of Louis E. Burnham, Organizational Secretary, Southern Negro Youth Congress delivered on the ‘Wings over Jordan’ Radio program,” 7 March 1943, Southern Negro Youth Congress Papers, Publications, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
13 Ibid.
organization rallied to change national and regional racist customs and asserted that full
African American participation in the war needed to be rewarded with political equality.

The organization emphasized ways to promote equality in the United States by
both participating in and critiquing the war. Employment discrimination provided fertile
ground for the SNYC to accomplish this. SNYC leaders, like many other Black activists
during the war, believed that equal employment opportunities would not only increase the
number of employed Black youth and finally begin to unravel the Depression’s effect on
African Americans, it would represent the furthering of U.S. democratic ideals.

At the fourth SNYC conference in New Orleans, Louisiana in 1940, speaker
Malcolm “Tex” Dobbs, a white leader of the League of Young Southerners (LYS), drew
on this theme in an address about the popular novel *Native Son*. The LYS was the youth
affiliate of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, a Popular Front organization
with goals that were similar to the SNYC. Dobbs discussed the circumstances that
Bigger Thomas, the protagonist of Richard Wright’s novel, confronted. According to
Dobbs, Bigger Thomas’s struggles reflected the hardship facing all youth. He offered
that Bigger Thomas was, “the symbol of all youth without hope, without a way to move
and to tackle the problems that beset them.” Thomas was a young man who “gropes
fruitlessly, with opportunity’s door locked on every hand like a rat in a maze, battering
himself to pieces and wasting his talent until he finally destroys [himself] or creates the
conditions which destroy him.” Drawing on the similar problems facing white and Black
youth, Dobbs explained, “all youth in America face this problem of perpetual frustration
in the search for jobs; and we must be concerned and we must not be willing to accept
simple platitudes as the solution to the problems that beset the youth, the problems of
jobs, civil liberties, and peace.” To the SNYC, indifference to discriminatory hiring practices led to reduced employment opportunities for Black youth.

The SNYC’s attention to employment opportunities was part national movement among African Americans during the war. National Negro Congress president and founder of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters A. Philip Randolph led the March on Washington Movement, which made substantial steps forward in the movement for employment equality. Randolph promised the presence of 100,000 Black Americans on the White House lawn on July 1, 1941 in his movement to protest employment discrimination. Roosevelt was skeptical and believed that Randolph had issued “an extraordinary bluff.” Nonetheless, he responded to Randolph’s plan, which, in his interpretation, would present an image of national disunity, by establishing the President’s Committee on Fair Employment Practices (Executive Order 8802). By creating the FEPC, Roosevelt ensured that, in a time of increased production such as war, it was illegal for the military industry to discriminate in hiring practices. For SNYC members, like other Black Americans, the establishment of the FEPC meant the same relief from the Depression that many whites were receiving through employment in the war industry. It also indicated that the federal government was obligated to correct some of the problems that Jim Crow produced.

Yet, the FEPC was not always entirely effective, despite efforts at enforcing Executive Order 8802. Budgetary problems and the lack of power to follow through with

16 Speech given by Malcolm “Tex” Dobbs, Southern Negro Youth Congress Papers, Conferences, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
complaints made the FEPC more symbolic than useful.\textsuperscript{19} After the reorganization of war agencies in 1942, the FEPC fell under the auspices of the War Manpower Commission (WMC), which impeded the FEPC’s productivity. The WMC insisted on filling the manpower needs of the war industry as expeditiously as possible, disregarding the FEPC’s authority to guarantee fair hiring practices.\textsuperscript{20} The WMC held no FEPC hearings.\textsuperscript{21}

The historian John Morton Blum asserts that most complaints against employers were filed “in the Northeast, where blacks were more conscious of their rights than they were anywhere else in the country,” and “the opportunity to file complaints … improved morale.”\textsuperscript{22} But Southerners, including the SNYC, saw potential for equal employment opportunities in the FEPC as well. They repeatedly petitioned for federal support in their employment campaigns in Birmingham. The SNYC established a Citizen’s Committee on Jobs and Training in Birmingham to ensure that job-training classes at the Bechtel-McCone-Parsons Airplane Modification Plant remained open to Black citizens. In 1943, the Committee secured FEPC intervention, “with the result that classes in chipping, caulking, riveting, and welding have been maintained for a small number of Negroes.”\textsuperscript{23} The Citizen’s Committee and the FEPC succeeded in guaranteeing the hiring of 17,000 Black workers, 500 of whom would learn specific skills, at various companies in Birmingham.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 197.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{23} Summary of activities conducted January 1-November 30, 1943, Southern Negro Youth Congress Papers, Administrative files, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
Yet, SNYC successes with the FEPC were limited in various ways. The Bechtel-McCone-Parsons Airplane Modification Plant refused “to train a single Negro woman for skilled or semi-skilled work, although 60% of the working force at the plant is composed of women.” The striking disparity between male and female skilled laborers highlighted some of the important shortcomings of the FEPC. In addition to the discrimination against women, the Citizen’s Committee on Jobs and Training noted that many of the Black men who did have specific skill training still worked primarily in low-level jobs as truck drivers or porters. The SNYC worked to arouse public sympathy to “break this bottleneck in essential war production caused by discriminatory practices.”

Voting rights were another important component of the SNYC’s wartime agenda. Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia required that voters pay a poll tax, which disfranchised the states’ poor Black and white citizens. Black citizens in Alabama were also required to pass an examination measuring civic knowledge and literacy in order to register to vote. Voter registrars were often illiterate, but held the authority to provide or deny citizens access to the franchise. The test consisted of obscure questions about the Constitution and legal system, including things like, “What is meant by non compos mentis when it is applied to a citizen in legal jeopardy?” Such questions discouraged eligible voters from registering. Esther Cooper, who held an M.A. from Fisk University, was well equipped to pass the test, but “even when I went to register to vote in Birmingham I had to take the test three times before they said that I understood the Constitution enough, and I finally passed.”

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24 Ibid.
25 Richards, 93-94.
In 1940, the SNYC implemented a Right to Vote campaign under the direction of James Jackson. The SNYC held frequent community forums to educate citizens on how to answer likely questions, how to register, and the time and places of registrations. In the context of World War II, SNYC efforts to educate voters gained increased importance. In the May 1942 issue of Cavalcade, the SNYC’s artistic and political newsletter, the organization invoked a speech by Roosevelt to urge Black citizens to fight for their rights. An article read, “if we are to attain the full citizenship rights with freedom from fear and freedom to vote and freedom from all discriminations which operate to limit our service to our nation in its hour of peril…it’s up to you to help speed the day of Victory by building and strengthening the organization which works for the mobilization of the youth for Victory.” The Right to Vote campaign represented a key struggle to win democracy at home. Jackson wove the wartime language of democratic rights to the larger narrative of the Black freedom movement in order to rally support and promote the SNYC’s cause.

In addition to holding community classes, SNYC leaders frequented local mines and unions to distribute literature and instruct workers on how to register to vote. In the summer of 1942, twenty-three-year-old white folksinger Pete Seeger, an SNYC supporter, performed for the steel workers and coal miners in Birmingham while James Jackson spoke against poll taxes and provided instructions on registering to vote. In addition to advocating voting as a necessary function of citizenship, Jackson and Seeger

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27 Report of 1942 conference in Tuskegee, Southern Negro Youth Congress Papers, Conferences, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University. 
took the opportunity to topple racial stereotypes. Black and white workers, in accordance with segregation laws, sat separately. Seeger and Jackson entered the room as though they were going to perform the opposite functions—Jackson with Seeger’s banjo in hand. When Jackson passed the instrument to Seeger, their audiences were surprised to see that Jackson was the speaker and Seeger the musician.\(^{29}\) Seeger’s performance for miners debunked racist stereotypes and generated a point at which Black and white miners could relate.\(^{30}\)

The SNYC regularly used cultural events, including concerts, to unite Black and white youth of varying educational levels and social backgrounds. Organization leaders and members admired singer and political figure Paul Robeson. Robeson, who graduated as valedictorian of his class at Rutgers University in 1919, used his fame as a stage performer and singer to promote progressive and leftist ideals, along with civil rights and Black internationalism. He visited Spain in 1938 to support the Republican forces because, as he stated, “I love the cause of democracy in Spain…as a Black. I belong to an oppressed race, discriminated against, one that could not live if fascism triumphed in the world.”\(^{31}\) Like other Communist-influenced activists, Robeson fully supported the U.S. war effort after the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. But where the CPUSA threw its full support behind the Soviet Union and began to neglect domestic problems in the United States, including the “Negro Question,” Robeson promoted the Black freedom movement as an essential component of democracy’s triumph.\(^{32}\)

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\(^{29}\) Ibid.  
\(^{30}\) Esther Cooper Jackson, interview with Sara Rzeszutek, 25 September 2002, Brooklyn, NY.  
\(^{32}\) Ibid., 254.
Robeson normally refused to perform in the South because of the restrictions that segregation placed on audiences. Though most cultural events and entertainment in the Deep South were segregated, SNYC members worked to ensure integrated audiences for their major functions. The SNYC organized an integrated Robeson performance at their fifth conference in Tuskegee in 1942. The program proclaimed that Robeson was a hero for African Americans, “at a time when democracy, sorely pressed, needs heroes.” The invitation to the conference stated, “Perhaps no other single artist so completely represents the strivings of the common people in all parts of the world for democratic cultural growth and for social progress. Certainly no other artist has more effectively made of the unique songs of the Negro—of America—a durable bond which unites our people with all men and women who today hold high the banner of freedom in face of Hitler’s onslaught.”

Writer Ramona Lowe, artist Arthur Price, poets Langston Hughes and Waring Cuney also performed at SNYC events. Through its integrated cultural events, the SNYC created a forum in which Blacks and whites could jointly experience entertainment and political education.

In the SNYC, Cooper and Jackson found a vehicle for change and place to anchor their political goals. The organization’s ideologies on politics and gender also helped them to foster and sustain their egalitarian relationship. As they contributed to developing the organization, it allowed the couple to expand their political philosophies and priorities.

Drafted into the Army in 1943, Jackson left his wife and infant daughter, Harriet Dolores, in Birmingham. He went overseas excited about the opportunity to defend

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democracy against fascism. The couple reunited in February 1946. In the three years they were apart, Cooper and Jackson wrote letters to each other every day. Roughly twelve hundred pages of World War II letters between them comprise the basis for understanding how Cooper and Jackson developed their views about national and international politics, their strategies for the Black freedom struggle in the South, their ideas about marriage, and how all of this was linked.

Days at a time would pass without any mail for either Cooper or Jackson. Then letters would arrive in bundles. Two, six, nine days worth of correspondence at a time would reflect a series of anxieties: “Do you have to wait so long as I for letters? Oh, I hope not!”; “I pray nothing is wrong with you… I get so anxious about you when mail is tardy”; “I had often feared that as the months rolled on your memory would grow dim, and I would feel alone as if you had gone forever.” Cooper and Jackson did not dwell on these anxieties for long, though, and after a paragraph or two, they would each go on to recount the day’s events, analyze reading material and current affairs, and offer each other thoughts on the war, the South, and their future together.

Cooper and Jackson maintained a strong and open relationship during their time apart. After discussing marriage with her sister, Kat, whose husband was also serving overseas, Cooper was stunned to hear how much her sister and brother-in-law kept from

35 JJ to EC, 5 September 1945.
36 JJ to EC, 25 April 45.
37 EC to JJ, 12 July 1945.
each other. They feared sharing their secrets and worries because they believed it would hurt the other’s morale. Cooper expressed relief that she and her husband had such an open line of communication, and wrote to Jackson, “I’m so happy we don’t believe in that prevalent idea about sheltering each other from our problems…I’m not only your wife, but your best friend and companion. And darling—if you disagree with anything I’ve said or done—tell me always. Our marriage must serve as an ‘example’ to all our friends, relatives, and the youth of the South.”

Cooper and Jackson understood that their relationship was connected to their politics, and that activists should be sure to embody their politics in their personal lives. They believed that the example of marriage and gender relations they offered was connected to the more straightforward political advances the SNYC fought to achieve.

Cooper and Jackson’s marriage was unique in many regards. Historians have offered substantial analysis of marriage in the twentieth century, examining issues like patriarchy, divorce, race, and class. Much of the work on married life examines the gaps between the perception of domestic bliss and the reality of the work that goes into maintaining a household. In the dominant model, women, despite their efforts at asserting autonomy, are either victims of patriarchy or their marriage fails. For many married couples, Black or white, equal relations in marriage meant sacrificing power and not performing normative gender roles, and performing traditional gender roles meant

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38 EC to JJ, 2 July 1945.
inequality between partners. For Paul Laurence Dunbar and his wife Alice, for instance, despite equal artistic talent and drive, marriage meant that the pair of elite African Americans would need to be an example of Victorian respectability. The Dunbars married partly to rectify Paul’s rape of Alice during their courtship. Because they courted during a time when a rape meant that Alice’s “honor was gone,” marriage was the only avenue for preserving her good, respectable name. The couple ultimately split after Paul violently attacked his wife and nearly killed her. The Dunbar marriage offers an example of power and patriarchy taken to the extreme.

The historian Martin Summers notes a particular deviation from patriarchal domination for Black couples during the Harlem Renaissance. Focusing on Wallace Thurman and Louise Thompson, Zora Neale Hurston and Herbert Sheen, and Paul and Eslanda Goode Robeson, Summers suggests a changing outlook on marriage during the 1920s. According to Summers, these three couples represented an experiment with the idea of “modern marriage” among Black couples in the 1920s. During this period, Summers argues, “Marriage was no longer solely defined as a union between a man and a woman for the purpose of starting a family that would, in turn, fit into a larger social network. Rather, marriage was becoming more of a means through which to experience individual self-fulfillment.” In all three of these unions, however, the couples became discontented and either divorced or led entirely separate private and public lives. For these sets of partners, aspiring toward a new kind of married life did not mean that the men were able to overcome fully their internalized ideas about gender roles within a marriage.

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40 Alexander, Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow, 132-140, quote on 135.
For Black couples, a breaking from the traditional model of marriage was different than it was for white couples. Because many Blacks had fought hard since Reconstruction to marry legally and embrace a normative middle class model of marriage—husbands working and supporting, wives enjoying the domesticity that they were denied during slavery—Black couples whose gender expression deviated from tradition were engaged with a different marital discourse than white couples who did the same. In addition, the hypersexualization of Black men and women in dominant culture meant that Black couples had significantly more at stake socially and culturally in maintaining respectable, patriarchal marriages than white couples. For Black couples, there was an added pressure to defy stereotypes and prove themselves successful at normative models of marriage. This aspiration is predominantly associated with Black couples who either had or sought to attain middle class status. Black and white couples who experimented with gender roles in their marriage may have been aspiring to the same egalitarian ideal, but for Black couples, this move resonated with a long history of invalidated relationships and the exploitation of male and female labor.

Still, Cooper and Jackson’s marriage was not a total historical anomaly. Others in Cooper and Jackson’s S NYC cohort had similar “modern marriages.” Ed and Augusta Strong and Louis and Dorothy Burnham also practiced the same sort of gender egalitarianism as Cooper and Jackson. For communists like Cooper and Jackson,

fundamentally restructuring the economic system in the United States took priority over attaining a bourgeois ideal. They did not seek to create a Black middle class as a parallel to the white middle class through their roles within their marriage; instead, they believed that racial equality needed to be attained through more sweeping change. The couple believed that inherent in the emergence of a new economic system would be the transformation of gender relations in public and private life. Cooper and Jackson’s gender and class politics, and accordingly, their marriage, were vital to their activism against racism. For Cooper and Jackson, then, a “modern marriage” worked well because both partners were deeply committed to being in love and to leading activist lives, and both believed strongly in women’s equality.

Cooper and Jackson could have a functional “modern marriage” partly because they each grew up with strong female role models in their mothers and in other women in their lives. Cooper was raised in a household where women were independent, strong thinkers and active in politics. Jackson’s ideas about female activism emerged from his mother’s influence, the women in his neighborhood, and his specific interpretation of Marxism. For James Jackson, being a good Marxist required shared responsibility for all sorts of work and acceptance and encouragement of women’s leadership abilities. As Cooper’s role in the SNYC expanded, Jackson took on additional household responsibilities. Cooper and Jackson learned over the course of their early marriage to work through their differences while maintaining an egalitarian relationship. Esther

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Cooper Jackson reflected on the couple’s perspective on marriage, stating, “We used to joke that if anybody comes and tells you their marriage is perfect, one person is dominating the other and the other’s just saying, ‘yes dear, yes dear,’ if they don’t have any differences.”

Many Black radicals had marriages where women had autonomous activist careers, as Summers suggests, but historians have often treated these unions as though they were business contracts or political alliances. And in many cases, these marriages looked more like business than romance because that was precisely what they were. Summers shows that Louise Thompson made Wallace Thurman a great secretary. Also, Thurman’s homosexuality complicated his “modern marriage” to Thompson. As much as he may have respected her and as much as his gender politics may have been radical, his sexuality precluded any sort of genuine romance. Paul and Eslanda Goode Robeson’s marriage was cordial at best, unhappy at worst, and either way, opportunistic and convenient. Historian Martin Duberman writes that “Essie…knew how to back down when it appeared her belligerence might threaten her own vital interest in remaining Mrs. Robeson.” Though the Robesons stayed together, their commitment was efficacious, not romantically fulfilling. Shirley Graham and W.E.B. Du Bois, who cared very deeply for one another, had a marriage that was unbalanced in relation to their activism. As the historian Gerald Horne argues, Du Bois’s marriage to Graham brought about many productive years late in his life, but stifled Graham Du Bois’s activism. She

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45 ECJ interview with author, 15 March 2006.  
46 Summers, 183-185.  
was a caretaker, and he was a “father confessor.” Of course, both Graham Du Bois and Robeson likely viewed their roles as wives as components of larger activist mentalities, seeing both their supporting roles and their independent activism as vital to a broad struggle.

Cooper and Jackson’s wartime correspondence highlights the importance of love in raising morale in the fight against fascism. The couple placed great importance on family unity and faithful marriages as key factors in maintaining their wartime morale. Almost all the letters contain a few paragraphs of deeply personal romance. Although Jackson certainly devoted a lot of space to political analysis, many of his letters included long quotes from poems, and they each spent a lot of time discussing the nature of their marriage. In many ways, Cooper and Jackson’s discussions of romance and war morale demonstrate how their letters link seemingly separate facets of life and show how the context of war brought the private sphere into public life, and vice versa.

The comfort of Cooper and Jackson’s relationship was crucial to easing the psychological trauma of war. On May 4, 1945, Jackson described a particularly gruesome scene which resulted in the death of a soldier who “couldn’t understand why and for what [he was dying] and he needed more time to learn such things: how to die like a hero for a cause.”

Jackson, clearly shaken, wrote to Cooper, “Such a day leaves one weary and sick of all the blood and broken flesh and pallid faces…and then your letters come like a mountain breeze quaffing the dead leaves away and leaving the bright green blades swaying in the sunlight…together we shall triumph over every hardship and forlorn mood and no matter what tomorrow brings – it will be good because you love

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49 JJ to EC, 4 May 45.
This experience illustrated for Jackson just how thoroughly important his marriage was in maintaining his stability through the war. It also led him to reflect on the problem of infidelity while husbands were overseas. Jackson argued that women who were unfaithful were “performing a service to the enemy. One such case can undermine the spirit of a whole battalion for the one reward every soldier expects is for ‘his girl’ to remain ‘true’ to him.” For Jackson, love and the stability of his marriage were not only personally important, but critical to wartime victory as well.

Cooper and Jackson’s correspondence provides a window for understanding the connections between love, morale, and political strategies. World War II allowed for a tremendous fluidity of political ideologies for black activists. The Black freedom struggle in the war years was rooted in both the desire to defeat fascism and a desperate need to address the contradictions of fighting fascism with a segregated army, workforce, and homeland. Historians have addressed the multifaceted layers of Black activism and leadership during World War II and have shown that protest activities—either through organizations or on an individual basis—ranged from using the framework of the federal government to employ workers to “everyday resistance” to rioting.

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50 Ibid.
51 JJ to EC, 26 April 1945.
52 Historians such as Herbert Garfinkel, Richard M. Dalfiume, and Neil A. Wynn, writing in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, had an interest in resurrecting black involvement in the seemingly “forgotten” war years from what appeared to be a historical abyss. Driven by the recent civil rights activism in the U.S., they each sought an earlier manifestation of black revolt to explain that black Americans had a long tradition of dissent and protest. The types of activism that they wrote about, then, naturally looked very similar to the sorts of activism that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s. Recently, historians have also taken interest in more radical forms of black activism. Ronald Takaki addresses race riots in his work _Double Victory: A Multicultural History of America in World War II_; David Levering Lewis has explored W.E.B. Du Bois’s radical politics and thought in the war years, and Patricia Sullivan and others have looked at the Popular Front and Progressive Party. Robin D.G. Kelley and George Lipsitz have examined patterns of everyday resistance. See Herbert Garfinkel, _When Negroes March: The March on Washington Movement in the Organizational Politics for the FEPC_, (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1959); Dalfiume, Richard M. “The Forgotten Years of the Negro Revolution.” _Journal of American History_, Vol. 55 No. 1, (Jun 1968), pp 90-106; Neil A. Wynn, _The Afro-American and the Second World War_, (New York: Holmes & Meier
would often vent their disgust with racism in the United States and in the Army, and then use the letters as a place to convert their outrage into productive energy.

Outside of writing letters to editors and his wife, there was little Jackson could contribute to the struggles in the South from the Ledo Road, an area which was isolated from much of the world and even from the rest of the war. The China-Burma-India (CBI) Theater of war was not as immediate a priority as the European Theater of Operations or the Pacific Theater of Operations. It started as a Lend-Lease project to assist in building roads to transport equipment across remote areas. Over 60 percent of the engineers sent to the CBI were Black. By late 1944, when Jackson arrived, the purpose of the CBI Theater was to keep Japanese attention divided. 53 Jackson worked as a pharmacist with the 823rd Engineering Battalion, and his unit rarely saw much of the action that any of the combat units might have seen in the CBI. In fact, by March 1945, only a couple of months after Jackson arrived, a military victory in Lashio meant that the allies in the Burma-India section of the Theater had accomplished the most important of their combat goals. The Burma-India section subsequently focused its resources on offering “logistical support” to the China and Southeast Asian Theaters. 54 Many of the injuries Jackson witnessed, then, were caused by equipment malfunctions, or were the

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54 Ibid.
result of incidents that the 823rd encountered, but did not participate in. Nonetheless, the area was still very dangerous.

Though the CBI theater was not a part of as many landmark World War II battles like the Pacific or European theaters, there was still substantial violence. In 1942, Japanese forces raided Assam, India, and the Japanese presence meant the constant threat of combat. Other dangers loomed as well. Trucks regularly fell off cliffs, the monsoon season meant frequent landslides, the climate was malarial, and many soldiers had encounters with tigers, snakes, and other dangerous animals and insects in the Burmese jungle. Whether by intent or coincidence on the part of the War Department, many political dissidents and military undesirables were stationed in the CBI Theater. The CBI was rife with personnel problems, and most of the soldiers stationed in the CBI “wanted nothing better than the speediest possible return to what they half jokingly, half fondly called ‘Uncle Sugar.’” Jackson’s unit included soldiers who were politically active like him and soldiers who were alcoholics or had other issues. In fact, the doctor in the 823rd was often so drunk that Jackson, who only had pharmaceutical training, often performed medical procedures and diagnoses.

As much as Jackson was excited to participate in a war to save democracy, he felt stifled in this context. He wanted to produce real progress toward democracy, and once drafted, World War II seemed like an ideal way to make a broad contribution to international justice. Instead, the dizzying heat, torrential rain, and “picayune”

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56 Esther Cooper Jackson, notes from informal conversation with Sara Rzeszutek, 6 April 2006, Brooklyn, NY.
57 Romanus and Sunderland, 294. Uncle Sugar became a replacement for both “U.S.” and “Uncle Sam.” In the 1944-45 phonetic alphabet, the word “sugar” was used for the letter “s.”
58 Esther Cooper Jackson, notes from informal conversation with Sara Rzeszutek, 6 April 2006, Brooklyn, NY.
commanders on the Ledo Road made him want to “consign the army and all of its components to a choice spot in hell.”\footnote{JJ to EC, 5 February 1945.}

In Burma, Jackson wrote letters to the editors of many of the newspapers his wife supplied him with, corresponded with activists in the Communist Party, USA and the Black freedom movement in the South, and met with local activists to talk about colonialism, imperialism, and socialism. He also was lucky to cross paths with his close friend Ed Strong, a fellow SNYC leader who was also stationed in the CBI.

Jackson’s heart was on the front lines of the Black freedom struggle in the U.S. South. Even though he looked forward to telling “Junior,” the son he and his wife hoped for upon his return, about “how I won the war,” he could not produce real democracy in his immediate surroundings, let alone the whole world.\footnote{JJ to EC, 2 October 1945.} As demonstrated by his decision to leave the pharmacy business to run the SNYC and unionize the Richmond tobacco stemmers, Jackson was not the kind of man who worked well behind the scenes.\footnote{Southern Negro Youth Congress papers, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University. See also interviews with the Jacksons, 2002-present.}

On the Ledo Road, Jackson needed Cooper not only to build his morale by making him feel loved, but also to help him feel like he was making real contributions to real struggles at home.

Cooper tried to place herself into his shoes. She could not imagine how difficult it must have been to be so accustomed to fighting on the front lines, only to be relegated to the Ledo Road, which was important in the background of the Pacific Theater of Operations. Reflecting on this, Cooper wrote, “I began to…feel the humiliation – the failure to recognize talent and ability, seeing stupid and prejudiced men placed above me
from whom I must take orders – I tried to feel all of this which has been your life for so many months – and I realize for the first time how much more I could have done to share your hardships.”

Cooper began to understand the difficulty of fighting in an Army that provided inferior resources based on the color of Jackson’s skin, that would not accept the highly educated intellectual into Officer Training School, and that put racists who placed segregation before democracy in charge. She knew that Jackson’s suggestions for the SNYC were not only beneficial to the organization, but also crucial to his morale. Jackson’s marriage to Cooper allowed him to stay engaged in the fight at home.

The connection between Cooper and Jackson’s marriage and politics offers unique insight into how the pair developed political ideologies with one another before presenting their ideas to public audiences. During World War II the SNYC used the government’s democratic rhetoric to push for improvements for Blacks in the South. With Jackson on leave from his position as Educational Director and Cooper running the organization as Executive Secretary, the SNYC became a vehicle for the couple’s political expression and a site where the couple could bond over a common experience.

Cooper and Jackson’s relationship with each other and their roles in the SNYC allowed them to use their correspondence as a productive space. Jackson often vented his personal frustrations with segregation in the South and the military with his wife in ways that he certainly would not have in formal settings. Military life was extremely frustrating for Black soldiers like Jackson, and the insults of segregation took their toll. The contradiction of fighting a war for democracy with a segregated Army reinforced the urgency of SNYC work for the couple. Jackson wrote on June 10, 1945, “I am so damn sick of this life I could cry about it. If anybody tells me about the ‘remarkable’

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62 EC to JJ, 21 June 45.
breakdown of prejudice in this damn jim crow Army I’ll spit in their eye. From where I sit, nothing is improving, it’s getting worse and worse. (Now the rest camps in this theater have been separated – one for black, one for white).” He continued, noting that the Red Cross in Calcutta had built a six-story building for a white soldiers’ rest camp, and gave Black soldiers only a small rest area.  

In another instance, Jackson told his wife about an aquatic training session at a white camp near the Tuskegee Air Force Base, where part of his training took place. Jackson’s unit ate dinner at the camp, where “it was jim crow from ‘soup to nuts.’”

After describing the rigid segregation patterns at the camp, Jackson continued:

Damned little cracker imbeciles were stationed everywhere to see that we sat apart from the white soldiers…Southern bigots, everyone. Enforcing their jim crow pattern like they were commissioned by God to do so…I have never really known the full measure of my hatred for the South and its native fascist way of life until I came here.

Jackson, who grew up in Richmond, Virginia and had also lived in Birmingham, Alabama, was no stranger to segregation. However, the enthusiasm with which the white Southerners maintained racial separation while waging a war against fascism fueled Jackson’s disgust. Had Jackson published an anecdote about this incident in an SNYC newsletter, for instance, he surely would have told the story differently. While he would not have masked the insult of segregation, he certainly would have excised much of the

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63 JJ to EC, 10 June 1945. According to Charles F. Romanus and Riley Sunderland, recreational facilities represented a main source of tension between black and white soldiers in the CBI theater. Early in the war, one base commander placed a recreation facility for black troops in an area of Calcutta deemed “out of bounds.” In addition, black troops from the Stillwell Road area, the Ledo Road area, and other areas all crowded into the one small recreation center in Calcutta. This recreation center was located near a brothel, which meant that “the venereal disease rate reached alarming proportions.” By 1944, the situation was under investigation and by 1945, the base camp was moved to a better location. See Romanus and Sunderland, 297-298

64 This letter is undated, but was probably written around April, 1944, and Jackson probably wrote it when he was stationed in Tuskegee. The date suggestion is based on a nearby letter in the file. Both letters mention plans for the SNYC’s 1944 Atlanta conference.

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid.
more emotional language. The way that he described this incident to his wife, however, demonstrates that even Black activists who were polished, courageous, and devoted to their cause still had thoroughly human responses to the pure offensiveness of racial segregation. Jackson needed an audience like his wife when he voiced his raw frustration before he could generate the refined language he would share with a public audience.

Both partners used their correspondence to air their uncensored disgust with the South in the confines of their relationship and then move forward, generating broad strategies for change through discussion of SNYC activities and plans. With Cooper as his correspondent, Jackson could release his revulsion with segregation to a woman who both was a confidant and had the ability to address some of his concerns with action. After assuaging his disgust with his angry letter, Jackson sought to use his frustration productively by suggesting strategies for the SNYC to address the problems of segregation in the Army and in the South. Jackson discussed plans for veterans’ issues in the postwar period. On April 15, 1944, Jackson suggested that the National Council of the SNYC establish a Veteran’s Commission. The Commission, Jackson offered, “would have as its objective the formulation of plans and activities for the promotion of soldier welfare during the war [and] for the integration of Negroes in all post war soldier welfare programs.”

A veteran’s commission was established, and Executive Assistant to the Director of Selective Service, Colonel Campbell C. Johnson spoke at the SNYC’s 1944 Atlanta Conference on the reintegration of Black veterans into U.S. society.

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67 JJ to EC, 15 April 1944.
68 Colonel Campbell C. Johnson, Address delivered at the 6th Annual Conference of the Southern Negro Youth Congress, Atlanta, GA, 2 December 1944, Southern Negro Youth Congress Papers, Conferences, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
respect, Jackson’s letters illustrate how his raw emotional outrage elicited strategic suggestions that influenced the SNYC and the South.

Esther Cooper’s letters contain a similar combination of disdain for the South and energy toward changing it. The insults she confronted were subtler in nature, and the way she described her frustration was somewhat more reserved. In one instance, Cooper wrote about a visit to a white doctor’s office. Normally, Cooper visited Black doctors, but Harriet needed to see a specialist, so Cooper’s regular doctor recommended a white doctor he believed was progressive on race issues. Esther Cooper Jackson recalled that the doctor was so insulting that she was sick to her stomach. Overall, though, Harriet’s checkup went well “until the nurse called me Esther…and we had it!” Addressing Cooper by her first name was clearly condescending and insulting on the part of the nurse. In addition, Harriet kept trying to run into the white waiting room to play with the other children. Cooper wrote:

ah! It’s so senseless—sometimes I want to pack up and go to shield Harriet from the humiliations of being a Negro in the South. But perhaps she will be a wiser and more understanding person being here—we must live for a year in a country free from race prejudice for her sake.

The following day, however, Cooper attended a meeting for the Recy Taylor Committee, an educational class, and an Executive Board meeting for the SNYC. In spite of—or perhaps in response to—the desire she expressed one day earlier to leave the South,

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69 Esther Cooper Jackson conversation with Sara Rzeszutek, December 19 2005, Brooklyn, NY.
70 EC to JJ, 11 July 1945.
71 Ibid.
Cooper fought steadfastly to end racial injustice, empower young Black Southerners, and organize Black leadership.

Jackson replied with pride, impressed by his daughter’s activities and his wife’s continual efforts to improve the South. He wrote, “Indeed! Harriet is already making her contribution toward the removal of the color line. I am sure she charmed Dr. Neely for a lasting impression…My! I don’t know how you do it. FEPC, Recy Taylor committee, Round Table, etc. plus a full day at the office and H.D. [Harriet Dolores]! You should sleep well each night with the comforting satisfaction of knowing that you are doing fully more than your share.” This series of events that Cooper described in her letters, along with Jackson’s reply, indicates that segregation’s offensiveness could function in two ways: it could drive Blacks to leave the South, or, in Cooper and Jackson’s case, it instigated activism and motivated leaders to work for greater justice.

Cooper’s activism in response to southern racism, along with her husband’s pride in her ambition and accomplishments, points to a connection between Cooper and Jackson’s marriage and her activism in the Southern Negro Youth Congress. The Southern Negro Youth Congress had a very progressive position on female leadership, and Esther Cooper embodied that position when she took the role as the organization’s Executive Secretary. Cooper believed that she could prove through her example that “it is possible to be completely happily married and still be ‘a progressive’!” Given this perspective, it was impossible for Cooper to take a backseat to her husband’s activities and, likewise, it was impossible for her to stand on the sidelines in the organization.

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73 JJ to EC, 22 July 1945.
74 EC to JJ, 22 July 1945.
Jackson, in fact, looked forward to working together with his wife when he returned. Though he planned and hoped to work equally with his wife, he did express some dismay at her pace while he was absent. He wrote, “your letters read like “My Day” by Super Woman…on reading your letter, I said to myself, ‘It isn’t necessary for anyone to be that busy, not even Stalin’…Does this letter read like I’m sore? Well, I am…I figured we’d have a busy time together ‘changing the world’ when I got back. But at the pace you’re going all I’ll have to do is live in it.”

Jackson’s frustration grew primarily out of concern about the negative consequences of Cooper’s pace on her health, even though he suggested that he might be a bit jealous of the contribution Cooper made without him. He wrote, “Take it easy, Honey. There is just no sense in tearing yourself to pieces so early in the game. If you don’t, I’ll be spending my post war vacation nursing you, and all those rosy dreams we cherish will be still-born.”

Jackson was also concerned about Cooper’s safety. Part of her busy schedule entailed visiting small towns in Alabama to investigate riots, rapes, and lynchings for the SNYC. For instance, Cooper visited Abbeville and Eufaula, Alabama to investigate two rape charges. She wrote, “The lynch spirit surrounds Eufaulia [sic]. All Negroes are ordered off the streets by 9 o’clock (We left at 8:30). The highway police & M.P.’s were called in by Gov. Sparks.”

Jackson replied, “I don’t like the idea of you taking trips into these little lynch towns on riot investigations…one out of the family in enemy country at a time is enough, my sweet!” Jackson’s worries and frustrations, though, were ultimately tempered by the pride he took in his wife’s success. The couple, in this

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75 JJ to EC, 13 August 1945.
76 Ibid.
77 EC to JJ, 21 July 1945.
78 JJ to EC, undated.
instance, became an ideal representative of the Double Victory campaign Black Americans initiated during the war: Jackson was fighting for democracy abroad, and Cooper was fighting on the home front.

The fervor with which Jackson wrote on SNYC issues derived not only from his passion for social justice work, but also from a deep sense of the individuals who would be most affected by change. He wrote, “be full of courage and confidence in the great work you and Louis [Burnham] and others are doing – it is the difference between life and death for our children, the difference between hope and despair for ourselves.”

For Jackson, activism meant devotion not only to an idealistic better world, but also to the future of his family and friends. His personal life, his love, and his concerns for the individuals around him were intimately connected to broader political ideals. Love was integral to Cooper and Jackson’s activism.

Jackson wanted to change the world with his wife when he returned from war. On July 6, 1945 Jackson replied to a June 23 Baltimore Afro-American article by Irene West entitled, “Females Halfway to Hell.” West disparaged women’s new position during the war. From Burma, Jackson wrote, “that woman is inherently the inferior of man…would be considered simple-minded even by the male supremacists out here in the Far East.”

Jackson continued by comparing West’s position on women’s wartime activities to fascists, who “have always advocated such a program of shackling women to the penury of the kitchen as part of their design for the super-exploitation, oppression, and ultimate enslavement of all mankind.” Jackson’s gendered analysis of the struggle

79 JJ to EC, Undated, at beginning of training in Greensboro, NC.
80 Article was printed on June 23, 1945. Jackson replied from Burma on July 6.
against fascism was inherently linked to his interpretation of the Black freedom struggle in the South.

In the same letter, he argued that West’s concerns about women could easily be employed by southern “mobs” aiming to drive Black women from their war-industry jobs “back to the ‘white folks’” kitchen and $3.00 a week.” He continued, voicing his perspective on women’s liberation in the United States, arguing, “The measure of our civilization’s progress is to be seen in the extent to which women have achieved their liberation from the tyranny of male domination and the degree of equality attained in all fields of endeavor.” Finally, Jackson offered some examples of strong Black female leaders. “May [Irene West] some day encounter Mary McLeod Bethune, Thelma Dale, Jeanetta Welch Brown, or my own wife, Esther Cooper.”

For Jackson, understanding the wartime world and planning for the postwar world meant recognizing that struggles around gender were integral to the fight for democracy. Highlighting female activists including his wife would contradict any claims to the contrary. His marriage to Esther Cooper was inextricably linked to his outlook on national and international politics.

As his letter to the Baltimore Afro-American suggests, on the Ledo Road, Jackson had a lot of time to read, write, and think about the future he planned with his wife. Though the psychological trauma of war was profound, and there was still considerable violence in the CBI Theater, very few of Jackson’s letters describe wartime action. According to historian Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, this trend was common among soldiers. Aside from censorship regulations, soldiers also sought to shield their loved ones from

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81 JJ to Editor of Baltimore Afro-American, 6 July 1945.
the horror and grisliness of battle scenes. Jackson’s letters were uncommon in their intimacy, as most soldiers censored themselves to avoid embarrassment in front of the officials who intercepted mail.

In addition, Jackson’s letters often addressed highly theoretical communist ideology. He discussed as frequently more immediate steps toward improving the racial climate in the Jim Crow South. Blending his experiences in the segregated military and his prior work with the SNYC, Jackson offered advice on how to urge young Black voters to reelect Roosevelt in 1944, teach leadership and protest methodologies to SNYC constituents, and fight the restrictions on Black access to the basic entitlements of U.S. citizenship within the framework of the U.S. government’s democratic rhetoric. Jackson thought about all of these issues in connection with how he would work with his wife when he returned, and how their love would grow through the work they did.

Jackson believed that racial problems in the South were unique, and planned with his wife the different ways they could work to change their home. The Southern Negro Youth Congress was a highly effective organization, Jackson believed, but he also did not think an adult “Southern Negro Congress” was the most practical way to work for racial justice. Still, he and his wife were getting older (when they reunited, they were 28 and 31), and staying with the Youth Congress did not seem like an ideal long-term plan. In planning the postwar years with his wife, Jackson offered that they might work for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). He saw that the

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83 Ibid.
NAACP had the potential to be productive in the South if it were administered under the proper leadership:

Can we declare that it is impossible to transform this quantity into quality with this organization (NAACP)? Can we say that the national leadership of the NAACP is so reactionary that it would rather have the lethargic Southern enrollment that of today rather than the whole South organized as strongly under its banners with a membership as active as they now have in Detroit? The very question is absurd. Of course not! [Walter] White has long looked enviously at the SNYC ‘miracle workers’. He has no doubt longed for such organizational talent to breathe life into the Southern section.\(^8^4\)

Jackson continued, addressing the various types of organizations in the South and the sorts of leadership that could contribute to a mass movement. He suggested that he and Cooper try to get jobs as regional directors for the Southern NAACP and build it into a left-wing oriented mass movement. He wrote, “The [Communist Party] in the South, strong in Negro membership, a trade union movement conscious of its role of ally of the Negro people in their struggle for democratic rights, plus the [Southern Conference for Human Welfare]—all would contribute toward the rapid rearing of a Negro people’s movement in the South out of the womb of the NAACP.”\(^8^5\) Of course, Cooper and Jackson did not anticipate on the sharp anti-left turn the NAACP would take in the postwar years.

Cooper’s letters spent significantly less time pondering plans for the future and much more time discussing the activities the SNYC was engaged in at the moment. An average day for Cooper included a full workday at the SNYC office, time with her daughter, additional meetings and investigations, and writing to Jackson. Although Jackson was busy in the Army, his shifts on duty were usually spent waiting for soldiers who needed medications or other treatment. He had time to read and reflect, and he

\(^8^4\) JJ to EC, 18 August 1945.
\(^8^5\) Ibid.
wrote much more introspective letters. For Cooper, on the other hand, constant activity meant that she had more to report on and interesting stories about her day to tell her husband. She offered constant updates on SNYC developments. Her discussions of current problems affirmed Jackson’s emphasis on the unique context of the South. After reporting on disagreements with an SNYC member in the organization’s New York office (the only northern branch), Cooper wrote, “These mistakes have taught us in the South a real lesson. We’ll study more and in the future not look to directions from ‘up thar’ for a correct policy on the South.”

Jackson also spent substantial time thinking about the leadership and administration of the Southern Negro Youth Congress. As a founder of the organization and one of its key leaders, he had personally invested a lot of energy and emotion in building the South-wide group. He was deeply concerned about the other individuals who had worked hard to make the organization effective. For instance, when Dorothy Burnham had her second child, Jackson was concerned about ensuring her continued inclusion in SNYC activities. He suggested to his wife, “Louis [Burnham] would do well to see that she shares in the glory of the brilliant new achievements of the Congress…In considering your new staff appointments for Educational Director, etc., Dorothy should not be overlooked.” The SNYC took Jackson’s suggestion, adding Dorothy Burnham to its large cohort of female leaders in the war years.

The activist inclinations in the Cooper and Jackson’s letters illustrate the urgency of pragmatic Black struggle in the South alongside the idealism of two Black Communists who ultimately struggled toward radically restructuring the U.S. social and

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86 EC to JJ, 12 July 1945.
87 JJ to EC, undated letter.
political culture. Cooper and Jackson were situated directly in what historian Nikhil Pal Singh calls “the intersection of state-oriented liberalism inclined to ameliorative reform and a relatively autonomous black activism inclined to acts of rebellion.” The couple represented the fluidity of Black nationalism and internationalism, radicalism and reform that worked within the framework of the federal government, and patriotism and its limits in the context of World War II. The war also offered Cooper and Jackson a new framework for understanding the Black freedom struggle in the context of global politics.

Cooper and Jackson’s internationalism was very common among Black activists during the war. Black leaders, ranging from the radical Trotskyite theorist C.L.R. James to the liberal National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Executive Secretary Walter White, believed that the ground on which the U.S.’s wartime rhetoric of democracy and liberty stood was fundamentally shaky. The simultaneous oppression of Black Americans at home and the effort to save democracy in Europe was wholly paradoxical. Black leaders also saw the contradictions inherent in the Allies’ occupation and subjugation of colonies across Africa and Asia and their concurrent struggle to liberate oppressed groups from Axis fascism.

By linking Black oppression in the U.S., particularly in the Jim Crow South, to the oppression of colonized peoples across the globe, leaders offered an interpretation of global conflict that resonated deeply with Black Americans in the United States. Black Americans might have participated in the war through either military service or war industry employment, they might have contributed to the war effort by purchasing war bonds and appropriately rationing their goods, and they might have wholeheartedly

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believed that they could share in the experience of saving democracy. Participation and support of the cause, however, did not mean that Blacks failed to critique the contradictions of World War II and fight to lessen the gap between democratic rhetoric and the undemocratic reality in which they and millions of subjugated people across the world lived.  

Jackson’s internationalism developed during his time overseas. Although Black soldiers all gained new exposure to international issues through their wartime service, Jackson’s theoretical background and political positions gave him a different vantage point for cultivating his internationalism. It is impossible to measure the degree to which Jackson’s fellow soldiers developed their own new understandings of their struggles and the world around them, but it is clear through Jackson’s observations that the context of war profoundly influenced Black soldiers’ lives overall. In one letter, he noted that his barrack mates in North Carolina were “stoic peasant lads from the cotton and cane country of the deep south” to whom:

a knife and fork are awesome and unfathomable tools, whose cultural level is almost primitive…yet…knowing that some will die when we go forth to apply the

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89 In their works Fighting Racism in World War II and A Rising Wind, C.L.R. James and Walter White both emphasized the importance of colonial struggles to the fight against racism in the United States. When Walter White and C.L.R. James offered their interpretations of the implications of World War II for black Americans, they drew from the immediacy of the situation. Their concerns were driven by a desire to produce and inspire immediate change. In recent years, historians concerned with black struggles during World War II have developed a much fuller understanding of the nuances and particularities of black radicalism and internationalism. Brenda Gayle Plummer, Barbara Dianne Savage, Penny M. Von Eschen, and Nikhil Pal Singh have offered new interpretations of black political struggle in the war years that draw both on White and James’s connections between domestic and international struggle and the more clear-cut civil rights organizing that Garfinkel, Dalfiume, and Wynn covered. See C.L.R. James, “Why Negroes Should Oppose the War,” in James, George Breitman, Edgar Keemer, and others, Fighting Racism in World War II, (New York: Monad Press, 1980); Walter White, A Rising Wind, (Garden City: Doubleday, Doran and Company, Inc., 1945); Brenda Gayle Plummer, Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935-1960, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press: 1996); Barbara Dianne Savage, Broadcasting Freedom: Radio, War, and the Politics of Race, 1938-1948; Nikhil Pal Singh, Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); Penny Von Eschen, Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anti-Colonialism (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).
lessons we are learning here do nonetheless elect to go forward with a confident equanimity that it is “worthwhile” and somehow they are actors in a drama that will bring happiness to a lot of people who are “having it tough.” They don’t say what – if anything – they think is the relationship between their service and their own aspirations or that of their folks back home.\(^90\)

Jackson’s letter suggests that even Black soldiers from the poorest backgrounds with the least education still understood to a certain degree that they were fighting for a noble cause. In spite of the soldiers’ unequal access to the democracy they fought for, Jackson observed that his fellow soldiers felt the patriotic spirit of the war.

Jackson’s intellectualism was unique among his fellow soldiers. The average soldier was, as the historian John Morton Blum suggests, “a reluctant hero, a folk hero…‘just ordinary American boys…friendly and enthusiastic and sensible…as normal as if nothing had happened.’”\(^91\) Historian Gary Gerstle elaborates, arguing that soldiers’ understanding of what they were fighting for was grounded in a sense of loyalty to their unit. While some nationalism, or a sense of common American identity, came into play for soldiers, they did not fight “for flag or country, for the Marine Corps or glory, or any other abstraction. They fight for one another.”\(^92\) That Jackson’s fellow soldiers lacked a developed understanding of the U.S.’s goals in war, then, was not uncommon. Yet, the Black soldiers’ lack of cultural development sheds light on how the practice of segregation had systematically excluded Black Americans from the very basic elements of the democracy for which they were fighting. Jackson’s fellow soldiers, given this background, were probably even less likely to develop a sense of what the war was about.

\(^{90}\) JJ to EC, 7 Sept 44.
than the average white soldier. Jackson’s observations speak to the overall power of the Allied cause, in spite of its paradoxes.

Once Jackson was overseas, his own level of exposure to the world outside of the United States changed and he began to think about the blatant similarities between British colonialism in South Asia and segregation in the U.S. South. He had read political articles and books in the past about the nature of imperialism, but seeing it firsthand changed the importance of the issue for him. He wrote in January 1945, “I have seen nothing in Alabama or Mississippi to equal the brutality of some of these Kiplingesque buccaneers.”  

93 Jackson observed that the behavior of U.S. soldiers toward the indigenous population differed significantly from that of the colonists. For the most part, American G.I.’s were respectful of their hosts. He told Cooper, “It is to the undying credit of our troops that such exhibitions have been the exception…rather than the rule—especially (and naturally) have the Negro troops conducted themselves well in their relations with our Indian hosts.”

94 Jackson had seen how Black soldiers who had no exposure to the basic implements of a modern society, who were far from the sort of worldly intellectual he was, could still understand the injustices of colonialism enacted before their eyes and respond to the situation sympathetically because of their own experiences with Jim Crow.

For Jackson, the war illustrated the connections between the problems of Black southerners and international concerns. Jackson was a well educated and shrewd student of international politics. His letters juxtaposed Black soldiers’ awareness of the world

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93 JJ to EC, 15 January 45.
94 Ibid. Jackson’s observations contradict statements in the official military history of the CBI Theater. Romanus and Sunderland suggest that there were more issues between Black soldiers and locals than between whites and locals. Their contention is problematic, however, because they did not engage in a substantial study of Black soldiers’ experiences in the CBI. Despite their observation that over 60% of the engineering battalions were Black, Romanus and Sunderland only address Black soldiers in four pages of their 400 page book. Their other claims, too, are rife with stereotypes about Black soldiers: they were poorly trained and had high morale but low efficiency. See Romanus and Sunderland, 297.
around them with the stark relationship between the circumstances in colonial India and the segregated South. Jackson elaborated on the implications of colonialism for Western Europe:

The west cannot honestly hope to attain a very high stage of democracy as long as the people of the East are held in colonial subjugation. The people of the Far East have been stirred mightily by the winds of freedom emanating from this Great War of National Liberation. This ferment can never again be contained within the framework of [antebellum] colonial possession.\(^\text{95}\)

The nature of colonialism certainly had a powerful influence on Jackson’s thinking about the character of racial oppression. He believed firmly in the Allied cause in spite of the U.S.’s paradoxical relationship with a war for democracy and its own Black citizens. Yet witnessing British colonialism in India solidified Jackson’s belief that fascism was not unique to the Axis; that World War II was truly a war to end racism regardless of its national origin. In other words, fascism and racial tyranny were global phenomena that did not stop at Germany, Italy, Japan, and Spain. Jackson’s experience and analysis fit squarely into the internationalist discourse among Black leaders during World War II.

James Jackson’s internationalism was not unique, but the couple does stand out in light of the relationship between Esther Cooper’s international experience and internationalist thought and her husband’s. In the war years, Esther Cooper Jackson recalls, “we’d covered the world between us.”\(^\text{96}\) In 1945, SNYC leaders selected Esther Cooper to represent the organization at the World Youth Conference, sponsored by the leftist World Youth Council, in London. She spent a great deal of time in her letters discussing the sorts of issues she would promote at the conference, and her experience was shaped by the connections between the U.S. South and the colonized world.

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\(^\text{96}\) Esther Cooper Jackson interview with Sara Rzeszutek, 15 March 2006, Brooklyn, NY.
preparation for the October conference, she wrote a bulletin on “the colonial question” for SNYC members and councils. She drew from a wide range of sources, including her husband’s experiences and W.E.B. Du Bois’s 1945 *Color and Democracy*.\(^9^7\) When she was at the World Youth Conference, Cooper took special interest in issues relating to struggles in colonies, and became friends with two female delegates from India, Kitty Boomba and Vedya Kanuga. She spent much of her time at the conference, both in sessions and socially, with delegates from colonies.\(^9^8\)

Attending the World Youth Conference was certainly not an easy decision for Cooper to make. Politically, she knew it would be an important opportunity for her, but familial concerns loomed large in her mind. With her husband overseas and a two-year-old to consider, spending two and a half months in London was not something Cooper initially believed would be possible for her. Cooper wrote to Jackson, “Alice…wants to take care of Harriet while I go to the WYC this summer, but “no dice.” Not 2 ½ months away from both of my darlings! The first trip I make overseas, I want it to be with the two of you.”\(^9^9\) Soon thereafter, she wrote to tell her husband that she had decided to represent the SNYC at the World Youth Conference.

Jackson’s first reaction to the news that his wife would be traveling overseas, leaving their daughter with her grandmother, was fraught with frustration despite his radical gender politics and the absolute pride he took in his wife’s accomplishments. On June 3, 1945, he wrote, “In spite of the apparent conclusive nature and sincerity of [your statement that you would not go] it was becoming quite obvious from your letter that you

\(^9^7\) EC to JJ, 13 July 45.  
\(^9^8\) Esther Cooper to Louis Burnham, series of correspondence, Southern Negro Youth Congress Papers, Correspondence, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.  
\(^9^9\) Quoted by JJ in JJ to EC, 3 June 1945.
had already made up your mind that it was your historic duty to make the trip and you
were merely seeking to reconcile this with certain lingering sentimentalities.”100 Jackson
felt out of the loop, even though he anticipated his wife’s decision. She was far too
talented to miss that opportunity, and he knew that she knew that. He felt excluded from
the exciting changes going on in his wife’s life.

In a letter on June 15, though, Jackson apologized for his sarcastic tone, stating,
“[I] just sink down in my chair in shame, with my consciousness smacking me across the
face for having written you so selfish and sarcastic a letter upon first learning of your
contemplated trip to London…I’ll deserve every reprehensible thing you may think of me
for having written it…in spite of the bigoted, selfish first reaction, I don’t hold a word of
it now. (my fears were the fears of Soviet girls when their lover-warriors were entering
the “wicked” bourgeois countries of Europe with their whores and jaded, tinsel
 glamour).”101 The nature of Jackson’s reaction to his wife’s news illustrates that he was
constantly and self-consciously striving to be a supportive husband, and to be consistent
with the political values he espoused within his relationship.

Additionally, in his apology, Jackson placed himself into the shoes of “Soviet
girls,” adopting a unique gendered perspective. Jackson did not express much concern
over his wife’s furlough from the traditional wifely and motherly duties: she was also a
warrior, and he understood that. Still, his instinctive concern as a husband had fused with
his unique gender politics, and he became a “Soviet girl” fretting about his “lover-
warrior.” Cooper, Jackson believed, did not face the same dangers as a typical woman

100 JJ to EC, 3 June 1945.
101 JJ to EC, 15 June 1945.
traveling overseas by herself, but in his initial reaction, her travels were a threat to him and to their marriage.

Cooper forgave her husband’s first reaction, stating that she too would have preferred it if another SNYC leader could go instead. Because there was so much delay in mail delivery, much of the exchange between the couple occurred weeks after one partner or the other had already dealt with their emotions around a given letter. Wartime, for a couple that wrote daily, meant that disagreements were fleeting. If Jackson wrote an unhappy letter on June 3, Cooper might not have been able to reply until June 17, and it could easily have been July before Jackson received that reply. On June 17, Cooper wrote, “by now you have my letter which explains my reaction to the reason for your objection to my attending the Youth Conference.” 102 There was no point in holding onto frustrations (especially since Jackson had penned his apology two days earlier), and Cooper spent most of the letter discussing other matters.

On first arriving in London, Cooper was shocked by the degree of damage. She wrote to her dear friend Louis Burnham, “You can’t imagine the damage from bombings…until you’ve been here—it’s horrible to see.” 103 After the Conference, the Soviet Anti-Fascist Youth Committee offered Cooper an opportunity to join an all-female delegation from the newly founded World Federation of Democratic Youth (WFDY) on a tour of war-ravaged Europe. Fixing some of this devastation was something Cooper simply had to do. Not only would she truly understand the war’s costs, she would also have an opportunity to help change things.

102 EC to JJ, 17 June 1945.
103 Ibid.
The group visited devastated cities including Berlin, Warsaw, Paris, and Stalingrad. In Berlin, which was newly divided into three sections, Cooper and the other women in the delegation had difficulty moving between the United States-occupied area to the Soviet-occupied area. Cooper soon learned that the issue holding the group up was her race. Because the occupying U.S. military was still segregated, and the unit Cooper witnessed in Germany was all white, the interracial delegation had difficulty moving about freely. Eventually, they were allowed to pass between sections.¹⁰⁴

Once the delegation arrived in Stalingrad, Cooper and the other women moved into the basement of a lone building that had not been destroyed in the war. The women from different countries would share stories, sing, and discuss ideas while witnessing the worst consequences of wartime devastation. While they were in Stalingrad, Cooper and the WFDY delegation worked as assistant bricklayers, helping to rebuild the city. Some of the other American women who toured Europe with Cooper were not married yet, and were significantly younger than she was. Esther Cooper Jackson recalls, “Some of them were a little startled that I had left a young child.”¹⁰⁵ Many of the women Cooper was with would later sacrifice either their activist ambitions or desires for family. Cooper and Jackson’s egalitarian relationship and the connections they saw between personal and political life allowed each partner to contribute more broadly to the Black freedom movement and the cause of democracy in World War II than couples whose roles were confined to traditional gender norms.

Cooper’s experience abroad during the immediate postwar period helped shape the analytical viewpoint she brought to both her activism and her marriage. Because

¹⁰⁴ ECJ interview with author, 15 March 2006, Brooklyn, NY. See also, McDuffie, 392.
¹⁰⁵ ECJ interview with Sara Rzeszutek, 15 March 2006, Brooklyn, NY.
James Jackson had also seen a section of the world during the war, the couple had an unusually broad firsthand experience with wartime internationalism. They planned to utilize their experiences in their postwar life. In one letter discussing plans for the postwar years, Jackson suggested that they could apply for Rosenwald Fellowships to live and study in the Soviet Union for a year. Personal and political considerations were at stake in this potential move. Jackson wrote, “We would love, work and play in a land free of Jim Crow; in a land of music lovers, theater lovers and people-happy and alive…the kind of environment for our daughter to become five and six years old—when she will begin to understand and be more or less permanently influenced by her experiences.” Jackson also suggested that living for a year abroad would be profoundly influential in their activism in the United States: “we would be prepared to fill speaking engagements on most every country in the world by virtue of having been there: You on Mexico, England, France, and Yugoslavia and USSR, and I on Africa, India, China and USSR.”

Cooper agreed that the plan was “tops” and added that the fellowship would also help the couple’s financial situation. As Cooper and Jackson planned for the postwar years, they knew that political activism in some form would be a priority, but they were sure to consider their family’s needs and the success of their marriage.

James Jackson excitedly anticipated his reunion with his wife. After a long discussion of Indian nationalism and Britain’s policies in wartime India, he wrote, “Freedom is in the air, on the march everywhere. Freedom for me lies over there where you are—‘Till locked again in your arms I will not know freedom from all the pangs of

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106 JJ to EC, 17 June 1945.
107 EC to JJ, 28 June 1945. Though both partners agreed on plans for the Rosenwald Fellowship, they never got around to applying. Deadlines for applications were due on January 1, 1946, when both partners were overseas. Once they were resettled in the U.S., Cooper and Jackson were immediately swept into organizing for the SNYC.
lonliness [sic] that inhabit the silent chambers of my being.” Through Cooper and Jackson’s World War II letters, the daily struggles against racism and the accompanying emotional victories and defeats, the connections between the context of war, European imperialism, American segregation, and the personal dynamics of a family disrupted by global conflict coalesce. The couple’s open correspondence sheds light on the human frustrations of life in the Deep South and the piercing psychological impact of war. For Cooper and Jackson, wartime also contributed to the way in which they constructed their marriage and planned their future together, separated by thousands of miles. The couple anticipated their future together with the notion that the war’s end would begin to fulfill the promises of democracy for Black Americans. They prepared to seek out organizations and locations where they could fuse mainstream and radical politics to affect change, and they continually kept their family’s well-being and future in mind.

Total war meant that no sector of life was untouched by global conflict. James Jackson and Esther Cooper’s correspondence reveals that freedom needed to be “on the march everywhere,” from the battlefield to the home, for the sake of its own triumph in World War II.

108 JJ to EC, 24 January 1945.
CHAPTER 3
“Only the Beginning of Battle”
James Jackson, Esther Cooper, and the Demise of the Black Popular Front in the Postwar Period

James Jackson and Esther Cooper reunited in February 1946 on a dock in New York City. In a characteristic play on conventional gender roles, it was Jackson who stood waiting, clad in a Stetson hat and with a bouquet of flowers, as his wife’s ship from England docked.¹ Following World War II, activists like Esther Cooper and James Jackson immediately plunged into action in an effort to realize the goals of the Double Victory campaign. Victory abroad was complete, but the defeat of fascism in Europe and Asia did not mean that the attitudes and legal structures enforcing segregation at home would change. Cooper and Jackson, along with their fellow Southern Negro Youth Congress colleagues, had great hope for the postwar years, believing that the foundations for true democracy in the United States had been laid by the nation’s triumph in the war.

But hope and reality were two very different things after the World War II, and activists knew that the struggle for social change in the U.S. South would be a hard one. As James Jackson wrote, “We’ve been around the world serving in an army which has been fighting tyranny, fighting for freedom, for the dignity and rights of the little people, fighting the concepts of the master race with its self-appointed power to circumscribe the lives and discriminate against other peoples…We believe in [the Four Freedoms]…but we are not stupid.”² Returning Black soldiers were well aware that their military service

² James E. Jackson, Jr., “Every Tenth American.” Quoted in Esther Cooper Jackson, This is my Husband: Fighter for his People, Political Refugee, New York: National Committee to Defend Negro Leadership, 1953.
did not guarantee them civil rights. The struggle to attain democracy for African
Americans at home meant that Black veterans and civilians alike needed to continue to
highlight the disparity between wartime rhetoric and the reality of the South while they
demanded genuine change.

The postwar years included some of the most significant civil rights
advancements, from the desegregation of the military to the Supreme Court rulings that
white primaries were unconstitutional and that racially restrictive covenants in real estate
were unenforceable. Yet the era also marked a dramatic moment of transition and
difficulty for Black Popular Front activists as the Cold War took shape. Activists like
James Jackson and Esther Cooper continued in their efforts to promote racial justice and
carry out their vision for the postwar years, but the U.S.’s diplomatic relationship with
the Soviet Union changed the political backdrop and threatened the efforts of Black
Popular Front activists. The Southern Negro Youth Congress, too, worked to sustain a
Popular Front-style mobilization in the South after the war, but confronted mounting
anticommunism that bolstered Southern racism. Instead of capitulating to the demands of
an increasingly conservative Cold War political atmosphere, SNYC leaders, including
Cooper and Jackson, added the fight against anticommunism to their program. These
activists believed that they were battling the threat of domestic fascism, but their fight

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against anticommunism highlighted their Communist connections in a nation newly overcome by Cold War fear and anxiety. Regardless, for Cooper and Jackson, their focus remained on the fight for racial equality, economic justice, and political liberty while they rebuilt their lives after the war.

The couple saw Black internationalism as crucial in creating a democratic postwar world. At the end of World War II, a progressive international youth movement burgeoned. The World Youth Council, an antifascist organization that united youth in allied countries during World War II, organized the World Youth Conference. Delegates at the 1945 World Youth Conference in London founded the World Federation of Democratic Youth (WFDY). The WFDY united progressive youth organizations from sixty-three countries and SNYC leaders described it as an “unofficial ‘Junior United Nations.’”4 The left-leaning delegates of all races represented a wide variety of religions from Hindu to Baptist to Unitarian, had specific interests in sports, labor, politics, urban and rural issues, and spanned academic and professional spectrums.5 Esther Cooper was one of five Black U.S. delegates and the only SNYC representative. Participants elected her along with five other U.S. delegates to serve on the WFDY’s governing council, and the SNYC was one of many U.S. youth organizations to immediately affiliate with the WFDY.6

Every aspect of the World Youth Conference, including the building where it was held, emphasized hope and survival amidst the destruction of war. The organizers hosted

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6 Esther Cooper to Louis Burnham, 13 November 1945, Southern Negro Youth Congress Papers, Correspondence, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
the World Youth Conference in one of a few buildings that had survived the massive bombing of London. Members of the U.S. delegation wondered if they had any right to be optimistic about the future amid such despair. Yet the delegates remained confident and hopeful, and saw great promise in their unity. The U.S. delegates learned that, “the problems of a ‘dead-end kid’ [in the United States] were inexorably bound up with those of a Czechoslovakian child born in a concentration camp or the child of an ‘untouchable’ in India.” The WFDY was “the machinery which could be used to cooperate with world youth, and the educational and inspirational experience of these twenty American delegates made evident the vital need for fully utilizing this indispensable weapon.”

Over eight days, the conference participants molded plans to take actions relevant to their own organizations and countries that would represent the program fashioned at the World Youth Conference. Cooper and other delegates prepared to forge the same sense of international unity on local levels.

For Cooper, the political context of the postwar years highlighted the importance of international youth solidarity. With the advent of the atomic bomb and the lingering memories of fascism’s rampage in Europe, the world was suspended precariously between war and peace at the end of World War II. At the same time, the worldwide condemnation of fascism as the allies triumphed revealed the possibilities for a full realization of democratic ideals, freedom, and equality. Esther Cooper Jackson recalls, “There was such enthusiasm at this conference, and young people were feeling that they were going to make a difference in the world; that we’d won the battle against fascism

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8 Ibid, 12.
and now we’re going to win some battles at home.” The U.S. delegation saw racial segregation as a key domestic problem, and their colleagues supported the need to fix the South’s racial caste system.  

The SNYC maintained close ties with the international youth activist community after the founding of the World Federation of Democratic Youth. The organization saw that community as a key ally the struggles they faced at home. In spite of the allied triumph over Germany, Italy, and Japan in World War II, democracy did not immediately come for Blacks in the United States. In fact, white supremacist violence increased in 1946 when African American soldiers returned from war empowered to achieve democracy at home. Lynching had declined steadily since the late 1930s, with fewer than five incidents every year but 1942, but in 1946, the number increased again.  

In Monroe, Georgia, on July 25, 1946, World War II veteran George Dorsey, his wife Mae Murray Dorsey, his sister, Dorothy Dorsey Malcolm, and her husband Roger Malcolm became a part of that growing number. Malcolm had fought with his landlord a few days before and injured him, and the four were in the car with Malcolm’s landlord when they were taken by a mob of whites and lynched. The FBI investigated but never solved the

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9 Esther Cooper Jackson, interview with Sara Rzeszutek, 12 October 2004, Brooklyn, NY.  
10 Ibid.  
11 Tuskegee Institute Lynching Statistics, by year and race. [http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/shipp/lynchingyear.html](http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/shipp/lynchingyear.html). Though officially documented lynching incidents were declining, the number of African Americans murdered by whites was still quite high. In 1951, William Patterson, director of the Civil Rights Congress, issued a 225-page petition to the United Nations Secretariat in Paris titled, “We Charge Genocide.” The petition argued that African Americans were the victims of genocide because “systematized deprivation and insult and brutalization of a given population” fell under the UN definition of the term. Patterson detailed the incidences of murder and lynching in the United States, and quoted a Southerner who argued that lynching was often overlooked because victims’ “disappearance is shrouded in mystery, for they are dispatched quietly and without general knowledge.” Patterson’s report was ignored in the United States. William Patterson, “We Charge Genocide,” in Herbert Aptheker, A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States, Volume 5, (New York: A Citadel Press Book, 1993), 30-52.
The lynching of the Dorseys and Malcolms occurred as the 1946 gubernatorial primary in Georgia approached. After *Smith vs. Allwright* made white primaries unconstitutional, a Black preacher from Columbus named Primus King filed suit for the right to vote in Georgia and won. The Supreme Court refused to hear the appeal, and the 1946 gubernatorial primary was the first election in Georgia’s history in which Blacks could vote. Though the lynching was not directly related to voting rights, the Supreme Court’s refusal ignited white anger and fear that the racial status quo was evaporating. The postwar period brought about intensified white anxiety as Blacks used democracy’s triumph as a catalyst for change.\footnote{Ibid.}

In this context, many U.S. activists believed that the U.S. South closely resembled the fascist regimes the nation had fought in World War II. Despite the U.S.’s victory in the war, U.S. activists had seen the horrors of fascism abroad. The similarities between atrocities overseas and the racial climate in the United States South alongside new restrictions on civil liberties led many Black leaders to see the South as not just segregated, Jim Crowed, or undemocratic, but fascist. Segregation in the South was not simply a way of social life. It was part of the South’s legal and political structure, enforced and supported by the national government, and given strength by the complicity of U.S. Americans across the nation. For left wing and progressive activists, along with liberals, the resemblance the South bore to a fascist state motivated a new wave of social movements. The promise of democracy’s triumph forecast the coming of improved race relations in the United States and Black activists of all political persuasions saw renewed

potential in the postwar years.

The SNYC continued to participate in the WFDY, and in August 1946, SNYC Educational Director Dorothy Burnham traveled to Paris to attend the organization’s Council meeting. Burnham detailed cases of lynching, disenfranchisement, employment discrimination, and other everyday elements of Jim Crow. She equated the situation in the South with fascism, and in a speech at the meeting, urged delegates to pass a resolution on the situation in the South.

Delegates from youth organizations around the world listened as Burnham implored them to reject the United States’ portrayal of itself as a center for peace and democracy and to recognize the brand of fascism harbored in the U.S. South by politicians, police, and the Ku Klux Klan. She declared:

Perhaps the members of this Council have accepted the declaration proclaimed so often that the United States is the seat of peace and well-being. I would like to remind you that two days ago four young Negroes were lynched in our country for wanting to take part in the elections. The Ku-Klux-Klan is growing very much in the United States and this organization is perhaps one of the most powerful active fascist forces in the world.14

Burnham’s clear description of racial violence in the United States directly contradicted the democratic rhetoric promoted by the U.S. government. She suggested that the WFDY council should push the Truman administration take responsibility for making democracy a reality in the U.S. She urged that Secretary of State James Byrnes “cannot expect to lead the world in democracy if there is no democracy in his own country and that it is about time that he, the Secretary of State, [do] something to stamp out the Ku-Klux-Klan

14 “Paris Confab Hears SNYC Leader Blast U.S. Fascism Accuses Byrnes of Harboring KKK-Fascism at Home and Preaching Democracy Abroad,” Press Release, 5 August 1946, Southern Negro Youth Congress Papers, Publications, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University. Burnham’s reference to the Dorsey/Malcolm lynching suggests that at this point, information on the details of the case were not clear. Despite that the direct cause of the lynching was Roger Malcolm’s altercation with his landlord, not an attempt to vote, the violence in the context of increased rights for African Americans in Georgia rendered the two inextricably connected.
and the lynchings in the United States and [set] the machinery in motion which will eliminate those activities.”

Burnham’s resolution passed easily. Delegates wondered “about this America which tells them without any humility how to run their democracies here in Europe and which yet tolerates racial oppression and brutality at home.” The council members at the meeting were interested in how young people in the U.S. South were combating racism, and sending a message to the U.S. Secretary of State reflected the WFDY’s global democratic agenda. To fight oppression in all of its manifestations included disfranchisement and racist terror in the United States, despite the nation’s official rhetoric of freedom and democracy.

Burnham’s speech brought the discrepancies between the U.S. democratic rhetoric and the reality of racism and segregation in the South to the forefront of a global conversation about injustice. Also, presenting government-supported segregation as a form of fascism and an affront to freedom to a global community of activists placed the United States in a position to be held accountable for its sanctioning of racism. Burnham and the SNYC believed that international condemnation of segregation could be a powerful tool in its demise. In addition, by using United States democratic rhetoric against itself in an international sphere, the SNYC could both employ that rhetoric to the organization’s advantage and expose the limitations of true democracy in the United States. As Burnham’s experience illustrates, the SNYC’s internationalism was both

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15 Ibid.
16 Frances Damon to Louis Burnham, 21 Aug. 1946, Southern Negro Youth Congress Papers, Other Organizations, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
17 Dorothy Burnham, interview with Sara Rzeszutek, 1 November 2004, Brooklyn, NY, from notes.
connected to an effort to expand the scope of the Southern struggle and a reflection of Black activists’ mounting disenchantment with the possibilities in the United States. The international youth movement provided SNYC activists with a means to fight for global democracy without losing focus on the struggle at home.

For James Jackson and Esther Cooper, fighting for global democracy implied that democracy needed to exist at the very base of the U.S.’s social structure: within families. Cooper and Jackson’s vision of postwar democracy was simultaneously internationalist and personal. Jackson had expanded his international lens as he talked with local activists while serving in the CBI, and was enthusiastic about his wife’s trip to Europe. The couple’s unique relationship and activist goals offered SNYC constituents an example of how to engage simultaneously in internationalist political activism and craft their personal lives after World War II. Cooper and Jackson were a couple who had successfully reconstructed their marriage in the postwar period, who worked equally and happily together, and who were deeply in love. The couple saw their relationship as a model, and connected their politics with their marriage. Young Black southerners who encountered Cooper and Jackson at any number of SNYC events in the postwar years learned from a pair of activists who not only had seen the world during the war, but were also engaged in wide-ranging internationalist activism and grassroots organization.

Cooper and Jackson’s experiences with postwar SNYC programs showed them that young Black southerners, too, were seeking to reconstruct their personal lives and implement global democracy in the postwar years. Just as World War II transcended all

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aspects of public and private life during the previous four years, the political and social problems of the postwar period permeated people’s homes and families. Young Black southerners struggled to reunite their families, resettle into jobs, and recover from the psychological effects of total war, with the added complication of being consistently denied the benefits of the democracy they had defended. The SNYC made veterans’ issues a primary component of their program alongside voting rights, anti-lynching legislation, jobs, and desegregation, all of which the organization had prioritized since its inception. Cooper and Jackson employed both their international experiences during the war and their smooth transition into domestic life afterwards in their campaigns with the SNYC to educate young Black people across the South.

Reconstructing gender relations within marriages became as paramount as politics for the SNYC in the postwar years. Many couples that the organization worked with continued to abide by traditional gender roles, which hindered SNYC efforts to promote women’s equality. Esther Cooper Jackson recalled that wives of workers that the SNYC had been trying to unionize were often, “kept so backwards that they [thought] I must have been in it because I was interested in their husbands.”19 The SNYC worked to combat this suspicion by organizing the workers’ wives to assist in unionization struggles and to include all women in their vision for democracy.

SNYC leaders asserted that Black women’s employment rights, in particular, were a critical piece of the dream of postwar democracy. At the 1946 Southern Youth Legislature in Columbia, South Carolina, Miami Council secretary Florence J. Valentine delivered “Remarks on Jobs and Job Training for Negro Women.” Valentine connected class, gender, and race in her talk, and argued that Black women “were behind the

noise—the hammer, the thunder, the drive.” In the postwar years, Black women’s job security was “the best weapon against defeat at home and abroad. Negro women need jobs…with no bars created because of color, creed, or sex. We, the Negro women, want jobs not only for today, but jobs forever.” Valentine’s talk linked domestic and international women’s issues, arguing that Black women’s employment was fundamental to their own security, and their security was fundamental to stability at home and abroad. She asserted that Black women’s equal employment would increase the possibilities for peace and democracy. In 1950, activist Vicki Garvin echoed Valentine, declaring that, “Historically, it is the burning desire of every Negro woman to be free, to live and work in dignity, on equal terms with all other workers. Negro women are eager to undertake a greater role to give substance to freedom and democracy, to help build an America of peace and abundance.”

The SNYC lived by its creed by providing leadership opportunities for women. Women had comprised roughly half the leadership in the SNYC national office consistently since World War II, and this was also true in SNYC clubs throughout the South. Miami club member Jack O’Dell recalled, “It was very clear that women’s leadership was very prominent.” He noted that women held important leadership roles in the organization and were not confined to secretarial work, stating, “They were very much a part of the decision-making and the policy setting and the public presence of the SNYC.”

In March 1947, Seventeen Magazine recognized the SNYC as an ideal place

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22 Kelley, Hammer and Hoe, 206.
23 Jack O’Dell, interview with Sara Rzeszutek, 12 March 2003, by telephone.
of employment for young women dedicated to social justice.\textsuperscript{24}

Cooper and Jackson sought to incorporate their new international experience and their gender dynamic into their postwar activism. Almost immediately, the couple was touring the South giving lectures at colleges, churches, and trade unions. SNYC leaders intended that the lecture series would provide young Black Southerners with an opportunity to understand where their struggle fit in an international fight against oppression. The SNYC emphasized Cooper and Jackson’s marriage in flyers for the tour, describing them as a “unique and outstanding couple.” A press release for the lecture series stated, “The tour is a feature of the SNYC program which emphasizes the close bond of interest which exists between American Negro youth and democratic youth throughout the world, especially in the colonial areas.”\textsuperscript{25} The lecture tour encouraged young Black Southerners to participate in local struggles as a component of working in solidarity with activists around the world.

Cooper’s international experience at the World Youth Conference allowed her to illustrate that an international activist community was concerned with the experiences of young Black southerners.\textsuperscript{26} Her subsequent tour of war-devastated Europe also afforded her a unique perspective on international struggles in the postwar world. The topics Cooper addressed on the SNYC lecture tour included, “Youth Movements in Colonial

\textsuperscript{24} Southern Negro Youth Congress Papers, Administrative files, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University. It is unlikely that the SNYC was able to hire any enthusiastic \textit{Seventeen} readers as its financial difficulties were mounting as anticommunism increased.

\textsuperscript{25} “The Southern Negro Youth Congress presents Esther Cooper Jackson and James E. Jackson, Jr. in a Vital, Provocative Series of Lectures,” Southern Negro Youth Congress Papers, Activities and Events, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

\textsuperscript{26} Esther Cooper to Louis Burnham, 13 November 1945, Southern Negro Youth Congress Papers, Correspondence, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
Jackson used his firsthand experience in a colonized country to address other international issues. His lecture topics included “Unrest in the Colonies – What Does the Future Hold?” “Negro Youth – Their Stake in Colonial Freedom” and “Political, Economic, and Social Developments in the Major Population Centers of the World.”

The lecture tour generated interest among young Black southerners. Esther Cooper Jackson recalled that, “[people] in some of the smaller schools that we went to in the Southern states were almost in awe of the ‘world travelers’ coming back to the South to relate their experience.”

Through the lecture tour, Cooper and Jackson impressed audiences with what they had learned from being abroad during the war, the interest the international youth movement took in southern struggles, and the manner in which the audiences’ struggles fit into a world movement.

Cooper and Jackson hoped to help young people struggling simultaneously for social change and family security. Just as Cooper had told her husband in 1945 that their “marriage must serve as an example,” the couple sought to represent their successful combination of love and activism for their audiences. Cooper and Jackson’s world experience, political ideology, and strong marriage mirrored the SNYC’s position on domestic, public, and international politics.

Through their involvement with domestic and international progressive youth

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27 “The Southern Negro Youth Congress presents Miss Esther V. Cooper in a lecture on World Youth! And the Struggle for a Lasting Peace.” Southern Negro Youth Congress Papers, Activities and Events, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

28 “The Southern Negro Youth Congress presents Esther Cooper Jackson and James E. Jackson, Jr. in a Vital, Provocative Series of Lectures,” Southern Negro Youth Congress Papers, Activities and Events, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

29 Esther Cooper Jackson, interview with Sara Rzeszutek, 12 October 2004, Brooklyn, NY.

30 Esther Cooper Jackson, interview with Sara Rzeszutek, 15 March 2006, Brooklyn, NY.

31 Esther Cooper to James Jackson, World War II letters, 2 July 1945, James and Esther Cooper Jackson papers, Tamiment Library, New York University, New York, NY.
organizations, Cooper and Jackson offered a powerful model for young Black people trying to reconfigure their own relationships while fighting for social change in the postwar world. The primary purpose of the lecture tour was to educate young Black southerners about the world around them, but Cooper and Jackson also offered their audiences an example of a stable marriage. At the lectures, Esther Cooper Jackson recalls, “young people were very interested and very curious about our relationship, and why we chose what we were doing in our life, and they asked questions about how long we’d been married…as much as anything else…that was a very healthy aspect of the tour.”

Cooper and Jackson understood that their relationship was part of their politics, and they knew that the model they provided of gender relations within their marriage was important in conjunction with the internationalist themes of their lectures.

Cooper and Jackson decided to continue working with the SNYC until the 1946 Southern Youth Legislature in October, when they would resign from the organization. As members of a youth movement who were now adults with families, personal considerations reshaped their activism as well. In reconstructing their family after they returned from overseas, Cooper and Jackson made decisions that they believed would improve the world for their children’s futures, but would also provide them with a safer present. The 1946 Southern Youth Legislature served as a defining moment in the couple’s activist career, marking not only the transition from youth to adult activism, but also the beginning of the end of the surge in the postwar Popular Front.

As the Southern Youth Legislature approached, Black activists were not entirely united under one banner. The historian Peter Lau writes, “While the left-wing of the New Deal coalition was to splinter from within and be ensnared and crushed by the

32 Esther Cooper Jackson, interview with Sara Rzeszutek, 15 March 2006, Brooklyn, NY.
emerging cold war, African Americans would push ahead on an agenda of democratic reform that represented a revision and extension of earlier reform efforts, not a turn away from them.”

Cooper and Jackson were a part of the postwar revival of the Popular Front and, with other SNYC and left-wing activists, were explicit about their desire to unite the working class and emphasize socialist reform as the crux of the struggle for civil rights. But the Soviet Union’s efforts at self-preservation during the war and the CPUSA’s cooperation with Moscow on political issues came at the expense of U.S. Blacks, and had driven many African Americans so far from the Communist fold that they were not willing to entertain the notion that Marxist reform could be appropriate for the United States. The postwar political situation served to deepen the already wide gulf between Popular Front Black organizations and liberal groups like the NAACP.

In addition, by the time the Southern Youth Legislature began, the U.S.-Soviet wartime alliance had begun to erode. Activists from the South who participated in Communist-influenced movements during the Popular Front era found new political waters to navigate after World War II. In 1946, Winston Churchill delivered his influential “Iron Curtain” speech in Fulton, Missouri, and declared that the new threat to world peace and security came from a former ally, the Soviet Union. In the speech Churchill coined the phrase, “the Soviet Sphere,” and provided his audience with what would become the language of the Cold War. The world was now cast into a state of “permanent prevention of war” in which “the establishment of conditions of freedom and democracy as rapidly as possible in all countries” was paramount. Churchill continued, “Our difficulties and dangers will not be removed by closing our eyes to them. They will

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not be removed by mere waiting to see what happens; nor will they be removed by a policy of appeasement.”

The federal government and local administrations began to monitor activists’ movements more closely as a way to avoid any tacit or overt appeasement of a potential domestic enemy. On March 21, 1947, President Harry Truman issued Executive Order 9835, which implemented the Loyalty-Security program. The program served to create barriers to government employment on the basis of an individual’s political positions. Though the Truman administration did not see an immediate threat in government employees, creating a new security apparatus in the face of mounting fear was a politically efficacious move.

The contradictions of the postwar political climate meant that the potential for progressive racial change was met with vigorous resistance among white supremacists. Mob violence was a very real threat for Black veterans in the South who dared to enjoy the benefits of the democracy they had fought for abroad. This violence had international reverberations, drawing attention in particular from colonies and Soviet-influenced nations. The United States needed to portray itself as a beacon of freedom and democracy, but its own citizens were denied basic rights and safety based on race. As Brenda Gayle Plummer explains, “Afro-Americans could not reconcile themselves to a racially oppressive order. They nevertheless often disagreed about the best way to challenge that order.” Black activists saw in this context an opportunity to utilize international attention and the postwar rhetoric of freedom and equality to create true

36 Dudziak, 19.
37 Plummer, 35.
democracy at home.

For some Black activists, early Cold War liberalism offered new opportunities for moderate reform. In 1946, the NAACP in South Carolina began a vast mobilization that doubled statewide membership by 1951. Around the same time, the NAACP actively distanced itself from organizations like the SNYC. Leader Walter White declared, “The Negro wants no part of any system in which arbitrary power is vested in one man or a small clique of men…whether they be Communist, Dixiecrat, or any other.” In spite of the NAACP’s moderate reputation, Black southerners still confronted the threat of white violence for affiliating with the association. The NAACP grew its membership and experienced mounting legal successes in the postwar years as it separated itself from the left, and the far left gradually vanished from the public eye in this era. Notwithstanding the deep divisions the NAACP sought to carve between itself and organizations like the SNYC, to segregationists, any form of racial equality might well have been Communism. As the Popular Front disappeared, to its most conservative and racist detractors, the prominent NAACP represented the left in the struggle for African American civil rights.

In the late 1940s, the NAACP promoted “a narrowed civil rights agenda” that included gradual reform and support of the federal government in the Cold War and emphasized its growing record of legal victories. While the association took substantial criticism for “acquiescing” to the national mood as the Cold War set in, it continued to promote “the full inclusion of black people in the political and economic life of the nation on a nondiscriminatory basis.” The distinctions the Association drew by carefully articulating its political affiliations separated it ideologically from Communism, but

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39 Lau, 190.
40 Lau, 182-190.
maintained its position at the forefront of the emerging civil rights struggle.

Other political and diplomatic developments in the postwar years helped to motivate social change in the United States. The Atlantic Charter and the creation of the United Nations, for instance, offered new vehicles for Black activists on a variety of fronts. The historian James Meriwether writes that the Atlantic Charter offered, “a postwar peace assuring safety to all nations and freedom from fear and want for all men. The colonial peoples of the world interpreted the principles contained within these documents to mean that democratic freedoms would come for them, too.”

The promise of democracy for exploited and oppressed peoples across the world seemed ripe for realization.

The creation of the United Nations offered Black internationalists the hope for change internationally and domestically, as well. The historian Carol Anderson argues that the United Nations’ vow to promote human rights “had the language and philosophical power to address not only the political and legal inequality that African Americans endured, but also the education, health care, housing, and employment needs that haunted the Black community.”

In spite of the promise of human rights rhetoric, Cold War pressures forced groups like the NAACP to retreat from their emphasis on human rights because language of universal humanity resembled communism.

Not all Black activists saw the U.N. as an appropriate channel for achieving rights. Some believed that the United Nations was too much a tool of superpower governments, rather than the voice of the world community. These governments would

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43 Anderson, 273.
not hold up the sections of the United Nations Charter that did not serve their interests; they “had already violated the terms of the charter by denying democracy to their subjects.” And, as Mary Dudziak illustrates, the United States had a great deal of authority in determining which human rights violations would be investigated. When the NAACP introduced a petition that related human rights violations against Black Americans, members of the American delegation, including Eleanor Roosevelt, quashed the NAACP’s efforts.

Worldwide, activists confronted similar disregard and continued to fight for change. Just as African Americans had defended democracy for a nation that left them in the margins, colonial subjects across Africa and Asia fought for freedom on behalf of their metropoles in World War II. The allied victory inspired many African and Asian leaders to push for decolonization. In South Asia, Indian leaders achieved independence in 1947 from Great Britain. Colonized Africans, too, believed that they were entitled to enjoy the rewards of the system they had defended. As a soldier from the Gold Coast wrote, “We have fought against fascism, the enemy of mankind, so that all people, white or black, unciviliz or uncivilized, free or in bondage, may have the right to enjoy the privileges and bounties of nature.”

Initially, the UN fumbled on the issue of decolonization as the Cold War emerged. Cold War strategy and moral idealism were in conflict, and African colonies became a focal point in the struggle between capitalism and communism. Though the United States had promoted the end of British imperialism under Franklin Roosevelt,
Harry Truman believed that the U.S. needed to acquire territories in the Pacific for military purposes. In addition, Truman believed that “the USSR had to be kept out of the colonies, and this new policy led [the U.S.] into closer alliance with the imperial powers.” Colonial territories and African independence were targets in the rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States, the tactical locales for political planning, and the objects, rather than the agents, of UN policy. In this context, organizations like the WFDY and the SNYC united international youth not only to promote social change across the world, but also to find support from one another when it was lacking from governments at home.

The international youth movement was an important theme at the 1946 Southern Youth Legislature, the SNYC’s largest conference. The flyer advertising the Legislature highlighted the changing international context that became so influential in the postwar years. It also addressed the problems of youth in a class context, which brought to light the emerging struggle between U.S. capitalism and Soviet communism. The “Call to the Southern Youth Legislature” underscored the tenuous hold the world had on post-war peace. It read:

> Before post-war reconstruction activities have been fairly begun and our wounds from yesterday’s battles have mended, high-placed, cynical and greedy men in our country are busily engaged in plotting with imperialists of other nations to push our country into an atomic war against the Soviet Union, our ally in the anti-fascist war, and to crush the colonial peoples now battling for their emancipation.

The “Call to the Southern Youth Legislature” also anticipated a Conference theme that connected the end of slavery in the United States to the post-war context, anti-colonial

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48 “Call to the Southern Youth Legislature,” Southern Negro Youth Congress, Conferences, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
movements, and the emerging struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union.

At the Legislature, SNYC leaders would educate delegates about their role in the international youth movement while reminding them of their own arduous history.

SNYC leaders decorated the church where the conference was held with portraits of all of the Black Reconstruction Congressmen in the United States after the Civil War. The “Call” continued:

We who were one with the people of the world in the war against fascist enslavement are determined, even as they are, to succeed in reaching ever higher levels of self-government and democracy. We share with the freedom-loving youth of Europe, Asia, India, Africa and Latin America the common struggle for true democracy just as we shared with them the fight against the common enemy in battle.

By connecting the recent war against fascism to the images of slavery and emancipation, SNYC leaders made the international youth movement relevant for the youth of the South. The link between current and historic oppression worldwide, coupled with the emphasis on the greed of imperialism and colonialism, highlighted the timeliness and scope of the struggle for freedom. That young people worldwide were continuing to fight forms of racial and economic enslavement after winning the war against fascism challenged the idea that democracy prevailed. Delegates to the Southern Youth Legislature learned that their fight for liberty happened in solidarity with youth across the globe.

International solidarity at the Southern Youth Legislature served a purpose for delegates and leaders alike, and it also reflected a larger discontent with the ways in which the U.S. government treated racial inequality. Racism in the United States was

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49 Jack O’Dell, interview with Sara Rzeszutek, 12 March 2003, by telephone.
50 “Call to the Southern Youth Legislature,” Southern Negro Youth Congress, Conferences, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
sutured to the rhetoric of inclusive, universalistic democracy and the American system of liberal capitalism in which only particular individuals with an historic advantage could advance economically. Historian Nikhil Pal Singh writes that the hope of equality and the American language of democracy “should be understood as performative, that is, they seek to produce what they purport to describe. They are civic ideologies, normative and pedagogical statements that attempt to create or reinforce a particular narrative of national identity.” In other words, when Black Americans did not succeed under capitalism, the state could remain disengaged and unaccountable because it promoted access to opportunity as universal. Yet, alongside idealistic universalism, American identity was built on the notion that individuals could advance by accumulating capital. But institutional racism precluded African Americans and other people of color from that model by systematically denying opportunities. Even if social movements were in a stage of increased activity, the disparity between state ideology and individual experience rendered only small and symbolic advances toward social justice. By looking abroad, SNYC leaders found solidarity and support that went beyond the framework of American democracy.

SNYC leaders selected speakers for the Southern Youth Legislature to address a wide range of local, national and international issues. While she was in London, Cooper first met Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois. Du Bois was in Manchester, England, at the fifth Pan African Congress. Impressed by Cooper’s sharp intellect and strong leadership abilities, Du Bois became interested in the SNYC and its leaders and agreed to give a talk at the

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51 Singh, 18-19.
Southern Youth Legislature. The conference was, by design, an effort to highlight the connections between seemingly disparate struggles and rally young activists to work with dedication and fervor toward massive social change. The speakers encouraged delegates to fight fascism in the South actively, keeping in mind the fact that their struggle was one component of a broad international battle against inequality and oppression. W.E.B. Du Bois made his famous “Behold the Land” speech at the conference, which implored Southern youth to:

Regard the South as the battleground of a great crusade. Here...is the need of the thinker, the worker and the dreamer. This is the firing line not simply for the emancipation of the American Negro but for the emancipation of the African Negro and the Negroes of the West Indies...for the emancipation of the white slaves of modern capitalistic monopoly.”

Again employing the language of slavery and emancipation, the speech insisted that the delegates recognize the importance of fighting fascism and segregation in the South. It urged racial unity and collaboration among the Black and white working class to defeat injustice.

Du Bois’s speech echoed his contention in his 1935 Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880 that emancipation after slavery was merely symbolic; that slavery continued in other forms of racial and economic exploitation. For Du Bois, slavery and emancipation provided a useful framework for thinking about what Singh calls, “a radical democratic vision that confronted national capitalism with the ‘real modern labor problem,’... the struggle of a racialized world.”

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55 Singh, 214.
SNYC’s position that the “emancipation of the American Negro” would be a momentous victory for democracy that would trigger similar victories for oppressed people worldwide.  

Other elements of the Southern Youth Legislature raised international awareness among the 861 young delegates and several hundred observers. Attendees represented a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds. The three-day conference included an “International Youth Night,” during which Cooper spoke of her experiences at the World Youth Conference. In a summary of the evening’s activities, SNYC Educational Director Dorothy Burnham described the delegates as:

…the youth of the South who had been hemmed in all their lives by the racial segregation existing in America, these were the youth who were denied jobs, many of whom could not vote for their representatives in congress, these were the youth who shared the problems of the youth of all America but who had in addition the problems imposed upon Black Americans by prejudice and an economic system which demanded a scapegoat.

For these youth, the challenge of thinking beyond their everyday problems presented an exciting opportunity to understand their connection to youth from “countries which were so foreign to us.” Delegates “began to understand that we were not fighting this battle for freedom alone. And we gained courage and fortitude to continue our struggle…we know [Cooper] had made friends for the youth of the South far across the world.”

The SNYC consistently used artistic expression to spread its liberationist and internationalist message, and the Southern Youth Legislature’s International Youth Night was no exception. Art and music were particularly effective for Southerners who did not

57 Dorothy Burnham, “INTERNATIONAL YOUTH NIGHT AT SOUTH CAROLINA U.S.A.: Negro Youth at the Southern Youth Legislature Celebrate World Youth Unity,” Southern Negro Youth Congress Papers, Other organizations, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
58 Ibid.
have the same level of education as SNYC leaders, many of whom had turned down academic and professional opportunities to pursue activism. As the historian Robin D.G. Kelley notes, the SNYC participated in a tradition common among Popular Front organizations that “not only recognized a unique Black cultural heritage but set upon the task of promoting ‘a conscious art, rooted in the lives, the struggles, and aspirations of the vast numbers of our race.’” SNYC leaders consistently opened meetings and conferences with a sing-along, held poetry readings, concerts, and puppet shows, and used the work of local Black artists on all of their flyers and pamphlets to create an open, comfortable, and unified atmosphere. Politics expressed through arts and culture created a bond between SNYC activists of all levels of education.

The Southern Youth Legislature included a performance by the beloved musician, actor, and Pan-African social activist Paul Robeson. Robeson, who was a leader of the Council on African Affairs, a left-wing organization that had close ties to the Communist Party and advocated for African decolonization, performed on International Youth Night. After Cooper’s speech, Robeson began to sing. Dorothy Burnham wrote:

> It was then that Robeson sang the songs of our America. He sang the songs of the workers and of the Negro slaves of long ago. Some of these were the songs that he had sung to the boys of the International Brigade during the Spanish Civil War…A hush fell and Robeson sang songs of the youth of China, France, and the Soviet Union…Our own hearts were full of admiration for this man who so loved the people of all lands, who hated tyranny wherever it existed and who this evening in a simple manner had helped us to come closer to the youth of the world.

Through song, Robeson conveyed the SNYC’s message of international youth solidarity to delegates in a manner that was accessible to sharecroppers, miners, students, and

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59 Kelley, 207.
60 Dorothy Burnham, interview by Sara Rzeszutek, 23 January 2003.
61 Ibid.
leaders alike. During the same program, delegates from Haiti and Liberia addressed the crowd. Both A. Romeo Horton, a Morehouse College delegate from Liberia, and Theodore Baker, a Haitian delegate, discussed the histories of their respective countries, social and cultural circumstances, the status of youth movements, and how their struggles were relevant to SNYC youth.\footnote{Ibid., Speech of A. Romeo Horton and Speech of Theodore Baker, Southern Negro Youth Congress Papers, Conferences, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.}

The surge in SNYC activity in 1946 was the group’s climax before its conclusion. Just as the end of World War II generated a new sense of hope for radical social change worldwide on the grassroots level, it simultaneously created the Cold War political climate that led organizations on the left to dissolve. As a Popular Front organization that included Communist leaders, the SNYC suffered in this climate. In part because the CPUSA had shrouded itself in secrecy during the majority of its existence and in part because the government relied on anticommunist propaganda to garner public support for the Cold War, the effort to vilify Communists took on a new life in the postwar years. Communists, whose perceived dedication to their political causes came at the expense of normal social and family lives, were not seen as individuals, but as mere cogs in the Kremlin’s global machine. They “presumably subscribed to the same beliefs, mouthed the same slogans, and followed the same orders. The notion of a monolithic Moscow-run party was utterly crucial” to domestic politics in the early Cold War.\footnote{Schrecker, \textit{Many Are the Crimes}, 131.} Cold War propaganda also portrayed Communists as fanatics who were prone to “irrationality and even madness.” In fact, as the historian Ellen Schrecker writes, “Especially among moderates and liberals, the notion that Communism was some kind of psychological
disorder came to be quite common.”\textsuperscript{64} This political situation began to erode the influence of the SNYC.

Across the left side of the political spectrum, organizations either forced Communists out or faced their demise. By the end of the 1940s, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), an organization that had been influential in the SNYC’s early years, had expelled nearly all of the Communists from its ranks. As the historian Richard Fried writes, the CIO grew wary of Communist influence and believed “that to survive a hostile and conservative climate labor must put its house in order. So it did, but not without cost. The CIO’s early militance vanished, replaced by a tamed bureaucracy, still powerful but no longer dynamic.”\textsuperscript{65} In this context, the SNYC’s difficulties were only beginning to mount, and Cooper and Jackson confronted new problems after resigning from the organization that defined their young adulthood. The couple left the SNYC in part because of their age, but also because they believed there was an opportunity to initiate left-wing change on a wider scale through other organizations.

Although the political climate was growing increasingly tense, Cooper and Jackson moved further to the left. On leaving the SNYC in 1946, James Jackson spent a brief period as the State Director of the Communist Party in Louisiana. The position was an ideal match for Jackson’s politics and abilities, but he faced mounting political opposition in the state. When he got to New Orleans, Jackson was scheduled to speak at a union meeting. At the start of the meeting, Jackson was disrupted by “a bunch of

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 145.
thugs” who “beat up some of the Communists.” Though he was on the receiving end of the assault, Jackson was arrested along with 119 others and charged with malicious mischief and disturbing the peace.

After paying a fine, he returned to the apartment he was renting. His landlady called police that evening because she thought she had heard a burglar in the bathroom. When the police arrived, they found the yard swarming with neighbors wielding guns and clubs, and the landlady had discovered that it was Jackson in the bathroom, “breaking things.” Jackson, it happened, had been hiding in the bathroom from the mob and had thrown an inkwell through the window when he saw an angry face on the other side.

Cooper had been preparing to join her husband in New Orleans, but this incident threw a wrench in her plans. According to an FBI informant, she reacted to her husband’s difficulties by stating that the U.S. was “rapidly becoming fascist and the people just won’t see the light.”

The contradictions of the postwar years shaped Jackson’s experience in New Orleans. He had hoped that his new position as Louisiana State Director of the CPUSA would allow him to lead a drive against fascism in the South, but on the ground, the situation proved much more complicated. As Robert Korstad writes, “The Cold War, the metamorphosis of white supremacy, the containment of the trade union movement, and the fracturing of the political left all helped to derail… the broader insurgency.”

Blacks were asking for equal treatment and access to opportunity, and poor whites,

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66 Esther Cooper Jackson FBI files, BH 100-1038, 6; In possession of Esther Cooper Jackson, Brooklyn, NY.
68 “Red Leader in Jail, Fears to be Freed,” Newspaper clipping, Jackson papers, Box 2 Folder 16.
69 ECJ FBI Files.
particularly workers, might have benefited from a leveling of the economic playing field. Instead, the jingoistic, anti-communist language of the Cold War led many white workers to see the social privilege that came with their whiteness, the one advantage they could cling to that put them ahead of Black workers, as an expression of patriotism. Civil rights became the political twin of Communism, and white opponents of racial equality could easily manipulate the Cold War for their cause. Jackson’s efforts to bring economic parity to union members combined with his race put him within arm’s length of lynching.

Meanwhile, in Birmingham, the SNYC’s fight for social justice was growing increasingly difficult. Though Cooper and Jackson had left the organization after the Southern Youth Legislature, they maintained strong ties to the SNYC’s leaders, particularly Dorothy and Louis Burnham. The couple was keenly aware of the overlap between the problems they faced and the SNYC’s continuing struggle. By 1948, although the SNYC was fighting the early stages of McCarthyism, the dominant culture of anticommunism forced the organization to refocus from a combination of regional, national, and international struggles to domestic issues. Early in 1948, the SNYC was placed on the Attorney General’s list of subversive organizations. SNYC leaders resisted the subversive label by reaffirming their non-partisan policy, refusing “to participate in the political idiocy of witch-hunting and red-baiting.” The organization only engaged anticommunism by denouncing it as an undemocratic, fascist scheme.71

In April 1948, anticommunism and segregation pushed the SNYC further to the brink of political demise. Events at that year’s Southern Youth Legislature drew national attention to the organization’s subversive label and obscured its eleven years of work.

71 “SNYC STATEMENT ON ATTY. GENERAL’S ‘SUBVERSIVE’ LIST,” Young South Newsletter, February, 1948, Southern Negro Youth Congress Papers, Publications, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
toward racial justice. Planning the conference proved difficult, but Executive Secretary Louis Burnham and other conference organizers were steadfast, refusing to succumb to the intimidation of local authorities and growing anticommunism.\textsuperscript{72}

The first problem for conference organizers was finding a venue for the event. Birmingham’s public safety commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor, who became famous for his use of fire hoses and police dogs on civil rights activists in the 1960s, threatened the venue owners and SNYC leaders, warning of Ku Klux Klan action and police intervention. Connor forced Burnham to meet with him on April 26, 1948. Connor held the SNYC’s poster for the event in his hand and read it, questioning each line. Connor read each line and replied:

‘Young Southerners, oppressed and beaten,’ ‘Who’s oppressed and beaten?’
‘Young Southerners burned and hung,’ ‘Who’s burned and hung?’
‘Young Southerners suffering daily the injustices of the Klansman’s law…’
‘There isn’t a Klan here, but there will be if you persist with this meeting!’\textsuperscript{73}

Connor continued to threaten Burnham with police and KKK action, contending, “Why, you’re the Executive Secretary of the organization—Why, that ain’t no job, you should be working in the mills or the mines. I ought to lock you up for vagrancy.” Connor’s attitude toward Burnham’s job invoked the legacy of Reconstruction labor laws. By threatening to lock Burnham up for vagrancy, Connor illustrated that Jim Crow included white entitlement to Black labor.\textsuperscript{74}

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Louis E. Burnham, “A Birmingham Story,” Southern Negro Youth Congress papers, box 8, folder 5. Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.\textsuperscript{73}
\item Eric Foner, \textit{Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877}, (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2002). Connor had a reputation of conflict with other leftist organizations in the 1930s,
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segregation ordinance was not upheld, adding that Birmingham was, “not big enough for the SNYC and him.”

Tensions surrounding the SNYC’s upcoming conference escalated sharply the following day when Birmingham police murdered 19-year-old SNYC member Marion Noble. Police arrested Noble while he was standing on a street corner. They took him to a garage where they beat and shot him. The police claimed that they shot Noble because he was reaching for a knife, despite the fact that he was handcuffed, had already suffered extensive head injuries from severe police beating, and posed no threat. Noble died on the way to the hospital. He was the fifth Black person Birmingham police had murdered in April, 1948.

The search for a venue for the conference continued as various church leaders made offers and withdrew them after Connor threatened them with arrest, the possibility that they would lose their church, and KKK action. After an extensive search, the 23-year-old Reverend C. Herbert Oliver “defied the Nazi like tactics of Commissioner Eugene [“Bull”] Connor in order that the flame of liberty and freedom might continue to burn in Birmingham.” He offered his church, the Alliance Gospel Tabernacle, proclaiming, “This is a House of God, not of Bull Connor. He has this city but God has this church.” Oliver’s assessment of Connor’s brutality reflected the growing fear among those on the left that the U.S.’s new efforts to restrict political expression verged on fascism. Oliver’s point reverberated with the position of the Communist Party, but his

and had once attempted to shut down a Southern Conference for Human Welfare meeting in 1939. See Linda Reed, Simple Decency and Common Sense, 16.
57 Richards, “The Southern Negro Youth Congress: a History.”
57 Esther and James Jackson: memories of the Southern Negro Youth Congress, James Vernon Hatch; Esther Cooper Jackson; James Jackson 1992.
position as a religious leader afforded him some political leeway that secular SNYC leaders did not get.

The conference lineup represented the SNYC’s firm defiance of mainstream anticommunist politics. Idaho Senator Glen Taylor, the 1948 running mate of Progressive Party presidential candidate Henry Wallace, was scheduled to speak. Wallace broke away from the Democrats after he realized that his anti-segregation and pro-union positions, along with his alliance with Communists and their sympathizers were out of step with the Cold War position of the liberal Democratic Party. Wallace had been critical of Truman’s style of diplomacy, and in 1946 was dismissed from his post as Secretary of Commerce for his public display of dissent. Wallace’s presidential campaign in 1948 drew support from civil rights activists, but was quickly defined by liberal Cold Warriors as too far left for comfort. Glen Taylor’s Birmingham visit was an important stop on his Southern campaign tour, as the Progressive Party had earned significant respect among Black activists, particularly in industrial cities.

Connor and the Birmingham police surrounded the Alliance Gospel Tabernacle on the first night of the conference to ensure that segregation laws were obeyed. In its eleven-year history, the SNYC never complied with segregation ordinances at its events. Taylor, wanting to express his solidarity with the SNYC’s cause and illustrate in the most palpable way his opposition to segregation, refused to speak before a segregated audience. After some negotiation, leaders convinced the Senator to proceed. However, to avoid a confrontation with Connor, SNYC leaders plastered Oliver’s church with segregation signs.

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78 Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 247. See also Glenda Gilmore, *Defying Dixie*.
That night, Taylor arrived and attempted to enter the church through the front door, which now bore the label “Negro Entrance.” When a police officer instructed Taylor to use a side entrance to the church, he refused. The officer replied, “We have laws in this town to be obeyed!” He lifted Taylor off his feet, threw him to the lawn and began to hit him. Police quickly arrested Taylor, Reverend Oliver, Louis Burnham, and several others. SNYC delegates struggled to raise $100 bail each for the arrested leaders.

Three days later police charged Taylor with interfering with an officer, disorderly conduct, and assault. Because of his status as a Senator, the Birmingham City Attorney did not charge Taylor with violation of the segregation ordinance for fear that he could take the case to the Supreme Court, where the constitutionality of segregation would be tried. Some later speculated that Taylor had set out to create a scene for campaign publicity, but the events of the preceding days demonstrated that the Birmingham police were determined to hinder the success of the conference.

Senator Taylor’s violation of a segregation law and support of a group that bore the subversive label confirmed the nation’s worst fears about Communism in the upper echelons of government. His arrest signified a growing divide between the left and the rest of the nation in several ways. First, Taylor confronted the authority of the southern system of segregation. In the eyes of the Birmingham police, he showed disregard for a way of life by attempting to enter through the Black entrance. Second, his alliance with a Popular Front organization like the SNYC drew even more hostility from southern authorities. His political party invoked contempt among white supremacists and

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82 Various sources related to 1948 Southern Youth Legislature. Southern Negro Youth Congress papers, Box 7. Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
anticommunists alike. Finally, Taylor’s arrest and his national status flashed both of these issues to a national audience. Ultimately, while Taylor’s arrest might have provided an opportunity for a national reexamination of segregation, his affiliation with a left wing political party and “subversive organization” prevented this.

The national press’s response to the Taylor arrest focused on the question of communism within the SNYC. Most articles noted that the SNYC was “listed in Department of Justice files as Communist-dominated.”83 The emphasis of the national press drew attention away from the issue of segregation by catering to the public’s fear of communism. As anticomununism intensified, affiliation with the SNYC was a political risk that many of the organization’s supporters and members decided not to take. Resignations, particularly among the Adult Advisory Board, grew more frequent.

The SNYC responded to the Birmingham incident by issuing a press release that emphasized the struggle between the SNYC’s democratic ideals, the image of democracy put forth by the United States government, and the fascism of the Southern system of segregation. One of Taylor’s lawyers maintained, “It is not Senator Taylor who is on trial, but the city of Birmingham which is on trial before the other cities of Alabama and the 47 other states.”84 Louis Burnham focused on the SNYC’s goals for social justice and opposition to the fascism of segregation. He wrote:

> Here, we are in a wilderness, whereto we have been led by the rulers of America, the Congressional hucksters of ‘separate but equal’ ‘regional’ education, the Kowards of the Klan, the bi-partisan experts at pigeon-holing civil rights legislation…In this literal police state—in this social wilderness—the weed of fascism grows rapidly and ominously. We stand in the direct path of its advance,

84 “Judge Rules Senator Guilty For attempt to Enter Front Door at SNYC Meet.” Southern Negro Youth Congress Press Release. Southern Negro Youth Congress papers, Box 8, folder 34. Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
hacking at it with a labor movement still pitifully weak, with a Third Party organization in various stages of embryonic development, with the splendid branches of the N.A.A.C.P., with the Southern Negro Youth Congress.\textsuperscript{85}

In this press release, Louis Burnham placed direct blame for the spread of anticommunism and racism on the United States government, further denying that there was real democracy in the U.S. The U.S.’s crusade against communism at home and abroad overshadowed the SNYC’s work for political liberty and racial justice, and reinforced the authority of segregation in the South. The SNYC struggled against its subversive label, but amid declining support and strong opposition among white supremacist groups, the organization closed its headquarters in 1949.

It is no coincidence that the SNYC’s demise occurred alongside the start of the Cold War and the corresponding rise in politically restrictive U.S. laws. As anticommunism gained strength, links between race, class, and political affiliation imposed themselves on the Southern movement for social justice and civil rights. As the historian Robin D. G. Kelley argues, “post-war red baiting in the South was accompanied by the rise of pro-segregationist sentiment.” This was the result of racist and anticommunist responses to Black activism during World War II, job competition, and federal legislation that supported civil rights. Kelley continues, “the Ku Klux Klan, the League to Maintain White Supremacy, and the Alabama American Legion deftly appropriated Cold War Language to legitimize white supremacy before the rest of the world.”\textsuperscript{86} In other words, when Glen Taylor was arrested at a Southern Negro Youth Congress event and the organization met its demise, nationwide anticommunism breathed


\textsuperscript{86} Kelley, 226.
new life into the Southern system of segregation.

In this moment, the rise of Cold War political repression in the late 1940s changed the shape of the Black freedom movement. Although many narratives of the postwar Black freedom movement argue that economic critique and radical change were swept aside in favor of moderate legal change, the moment itself was far more complex. As Peter Lau writes, “the African American civil rights movement did not represent a turn away from the economic concerns of the New Deal era. Rather, the movement brought to the surface the limits of the New Deal era’s ostensibly universal reform efforts.” Black leaders across the South had similar goals: legal parity, equal access to opportunity, political enfranchisement, and freedom from racial violence. Equitable economic circumstances for African Americans were implicitly connected to each of those goals.

But the means to success differed depending on where activists situated themselves on the political spectrum. As Lau argues, the NAACP under the leadership of the stoutly anticommunist Walter White adapted itself to changing national circumstances to best provide for the wellbeing of its local branches and expelled Communists where possible. Local Association leaders saw this shift as “consistent with the organization’s history and the constantly shifting terrain of struggle confronted by black people in America.” On the other hand, the SNYC put every bit of its waning energy into reviving the Popular Front. The distinctions in the two types of critique represented the

88 Lau, 12.
89 Ibid., 191.
ascendant liberal anticommunist push for civil rights and the declining Popular Front form of critique. These differences not only account for the successes and failures of two types of organization, they also illustrate the ways in which the U.S.’s conflict with the Soviet Union influenced activism at home. The events at the 1948 Southern Youth Legislature marked a key moment of transition for Black activism in the United States. It was, as Louis Burnham remarked, “The end of a story, but only the beginning of battle.”

The growing connection between racism and anticommunism that came along with the Cold War was not specific to the South, and Cooper and Jackson experienced a similar set of difficulties after moving north. After Jackson’s tumultuous and life-threatening experience leading the Louisiana Communist Party, the family moved to Detroit, Michigan, where Jackson worked as the Educational Director in the state’s Communist Party. There, Cooper and Jackson’s second daughter, Kathryn, was born.

Cooper was a local organizer for the Progressive Party in Detroit. In 1949, she became an employee of the local branch of the Civil Rights Congress (CRC), an organization that included prominent Communist leaders and led struggles against political repression and racism. Jackson worked to bring the Black freedom movement and the CPUSA together and experienced some success in labor union organization with the Ford autoworkers. Nonetheless, his formal leadership position in the Party in Michigan became the basis for his future legal troubles. In Detroit, the couple confronted racism and political repression from the Red Squad, a division of the local police department assigned to monitor individuals whose politics appeared subversive. In a

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fashion similar to the post World War I red scare, local police forces upheld the goals of
the House Un-American Activities Committee by observing and raiding suspected party-
influenced groups. Red squads typically exchanged information with the FBI, and
connected national and local anticommunist efforts.\textsuperscript{91} In their usual fashion, Cooper and
Jackson refused to compromise their ideals to avoid political and legal troubles.

In the postwar years, the CPUSA was beginning to redefine itself as it confronted
mounting national opposition. Under the leadership of Earl Browder in 1944, the
CPUSA became the Communist Political Association as part of an effort to end the
Party’s isolation in American politics. Browder hoped this move would help “to explain
our true relationship with all other democratic and progressive groupings which operate
through…the two party system, and take our place in true collaboration at their side.”\textsuperscript{92}
Browder, in the midst of a U.S.-Soviet alliance targeted at defeating fascism, argued that
capitalism and communism could peacefully coexist in the United States.

The transition from Party to Association was not well received, and it did not last
long. A scathing article by French Communist leader Jacques Duclos along with
substantial domestic criticism of Browder led Communists to reestablish the organization
as a political party shortly before the war ended.\textsuperscript{93} After World War II, Communists
expelled Browder and, under the new leadership of William Z. Foster and Eugene
Dennis, the Party attempted to rebuild itself in the wake of increasing anticommunist
sentiment across the United States. As the historian Maurice Isserman writes,
“Browder’s successors in the CP’s leadership found their authority strengthened in the

\textsuperscript{91} Ellen Schrecker, \textit{Many Are the Crimes}, 91; 212.
\textsuperscript{92} Maurice Isserman, \textit{Which Side Were You On? The American Communist Party During the Second World
War}, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1982), 190.
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid.
years after 1945 by the fact that, after all, Browder had clearly been proven wrong” on the point that a “peaceful coexistence between socialism and capitalism in international relations” was possible.  

As anticommunist hysteria began to pervade all areas of public life, social activism, and cultural expression, Foster led the Party under the “five minutes to midnight” slogan. The new line emerged from the Party’s expectation that there would imminently be a “new depression, the triumph of domestic fascism, and the outbreak of war between the United States and the Soviet Union.” Whether or not doom really was the Party’s impending fate, leaders prepared for the worst by mounting an ideological wall of defense. Though a more pragmatic attempt to integrate itself into mainstream American politics might have salvaged some of the Party’s credibility, the opportunities to do so were growing increasingly scarce, and would conflict with Foster’s leadership in any case. In turn, when leaders Benjamin Davis, Gus Hall, Henry Winston, Robert Thompson, Gil Green, William Z. Foster, John Gates, Eugene Dennis, Irving Potash, Jack Stachel, John Williamson, and Carl Winter were indicted under the Smith Act on July 20, 1948, the defense tactics the Party took further alienated the leaders from the political mainstream. As Isserman argues, “Foster insisted that they undertake an active defense of their theoretical and political positions, rather than concentrating on civil liberties issues. As a result, the eleven defendants and their lawyers wound up in long, fruitless exchanges with the prosecution over the true meaning of passages in the works of Marx, Lenin, and Stalin—a strategy that brought neither legal nor political benefit.” Instead of arguing that the Smith Act implemented a form of political repression that was

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94 Ibid., 241.
95 Ibid., 246.
96 Ibid., 247.
incompatible with democratic ideals as some leaders later did, the Party in 1948 found itself explaining its philosophy to a hostile, unforgiving audience. 

During this time, Jackson maintained his internationalist focus in the Black freedom movement, and fused that with the goals of the Michigan CP. In a Michigan CP statement, the organization assailed Truman’s Marshall Plan and his work to implement a Universal Military Training (UMT) program. Party leaders linked the government’s effort at the “permanent prevention of war” abroad by promoting so-called democratic ideals to the situation confronting African Americans in the U.S. Truman, the Party argued, sought to implement a “draft and UMT so that the Wall Street monopolists and military men who control the bi-partisan government in Washington would be ‘free’ to dominate the world.” Because the government intended to use the Marshall Plan and Universal Military Training to preserve peace and spread democracy, the Michigan Party asserted, “We can’t make the world safe for democracy without making democracy safe for 14 million Negro people at home.” The Party’s attention to Universal Military Training was closely connected to its critique of the diplomacy Truman used with the Soviet Union in the postwar years. The critique emerged from the language of World War II by highlighting the failure to achieve one of the two victories Black and progressive Americans had fought for.

While the Party faced growing criticism, harassment, and repression from the government, the organization linked the Black freedom movement and Black internationalism with a scathing criticism of U.S. politics and diplomacy. The statement continued, “The Soviet Union and the new European democracies are leading the march of the people towards liberation of colonies, extension of democracy and socialism. They

97 Jackson papers, box 3 folder 13.
are therefore the friends and not the enemies of the American people.” 98 Whereas most Americans viewed communism and democracy as mutually exclusive, the Michigan CP saw the two as inextricably linked. That Communist governments worked on behalf of colonies seeking liberation led Party leaders to perceive the Soviet Union as the vanguard of the global Black freedom movement. James Jackson and other Black U.S. Communists were heartened by the Soviet Union’s attitude toward nations fighting colonialism. Party activists, who had no political clout to lose, had no reservations about praising the Soviet Union as a beacon of democracy.

Though the Party traveled in international political circles and saw its movement as a reflection of a global workers’ struggle for democracy, the early Cold War also led some leaders to attempt to reaffirm their patriotism as Americans. After the Detroit city council set out to establish a local Loyalty Board that would investigate city employees, Jackson issued a statement on behalf of the Michigan CP. He argued that the CPUSA was comprised of loyal Americans, stating, “The Communist Party of the United States can trace its direct lineal development back 130 years in the history of the American working class struggle for bread…The communists in word and deed are the most loyal fighters in the defense of the Constitution and Bill of Rights against all those jackals of reaction and fascism.” 99 In defending Communists’ national loyalty, Jackson hoped to strike a blow against the repressive postwar political backlash against the left. In combination with the changing shape of the Black freedom movement in the early Cold War, Jackson’s statement urged his audience to reconsider all declarations about individuals’ presumed disloyalty, and to reevaluate what made a person’s political views

98 Ibid.
99 Jackson papers, Box 3, Folder 13, Tamiment Library, New York University.
patriotic or subversive. His position was a bit unusual, as it came in a moment when the Party was moving further away from declaring its loyalty to the American political system, but it offered a counterpoint to the government’s efforts to cast American communism as a monolith.

Jackson believed that the 1948 indictment of the twelve national Party leaders emboldened Detroit and other cities to form Loyalty Boards. He declared that Detroit Mayor Eugene Van Antwerp, “in the tax payer’s employ may have gained some boldness from the courageous conduct of the puny marionette on the bench at Foley Square.”

The indictments and the rise in government-sponsored organizations dedicated to rooting Communists out of public life solidified the perceived criminality of Communism. In spite of his message of loyal American Communism, Jackson’s activism with the Michigan CP became evidence against him in his own 1956 Smith Act trial.

Though Esther Cooper’s formal affiliation with the Michigan CP was as a member, not a leader, the FBI construed her work with the Civil Rights Congress and Progressive Party as worthy of close investigation. They had been monitoring her activities since the early 1940s when she was a Southern Negro Youth Congress leader. The Bureau listed Cooper’s occupation from 1947-1948 as “housewife.” Cooper quickly struck a balance between raising two young daughters and being involved in political organizations, but she prioritized her children. In fact, motherhood might have saved her from a political setup by the FBI. In one instance in January 1948, an informant, working in collaboration with another individual known to investigators, tried to persuade Cooper to speak about opposition to Universal Military Training at an event. Cooper refused

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100 Jackson papers, Box 3, Folder 13, Tamiment Library, New York University. Reference to Judge Harry Medina, whose behavior in the trial was biased and influenced by anticommunist sentiment.
because Kathryn was barely four months old at that time and she was not yet comfortable with leaving the child to go speak at an event.\textsuperscript{101} Later, in March, she did speak on behalf of the Progressive Party on Universal Military Training at a Women’s Rally for Peace.\textsuperscript{102}

For Cooper, working for the Progressive Party was a part of the natural progression of her politics. Though a member of the CPUSA, she strove to maintain her political independence and was never formally part of the Party’s leadership structure in the way that her husband was.\textsuperscript{103} She was a quintessential Popular Front activist, bringing Communist ideals with her without permitting her Marxism to overshadow the goals of other organizations. Nonetheless, her association with the Progressive Party helped the FBI to impugn further her politics and her family. As an organizer in the local Progressive Party, Cooper helped to distribute leaflets and flyers on actions the government should take on anti-lynching, anti-poll tax, and FEPC expansion legislation. The FBI noted that Cooper “was included in the setting up of a CP Steering Committee for the affairs of the Progressive Party.”\textsuperscript{104} She also worked with local Black communities to rally support for Henry Wallace’s Progressive Party campaign for President.

For Cooper and Jackson, whose wartime hopes included building a leftist coalition across the South in the postwar years through the vehicle of the NAACP, their positions on foreign policy and diplomacy isolated them from the most recognizable organization of the Black freedom movement. During the 1948 election, the Wallace campaign against the Democrats realigned sectors of the Black freedom movement,

\textsuperscript{101} FBI files, DE 100-16825, 3. The names of the informant and his or her collaborator, along with the individual who suggested the setup, are obscured in the files.
\textsuperscript{102} FBI files, DE 100-16825, 4.
\textsuperscript{103} McDuffie, “Long Journeys.”
\textsuperscript{104} FBI files, NY 100-18618, 22.
building the distinctions between the activist mainstream and the fringe in ways that would subsist throughout the civil rights movement. NAACP Executive Director Walter White argued that Wallace was a mere dupe of the CPUSA and would never be elected, in spite of his own contention that civil rights were “the measuring rod by which candidates…will be judged.” White’s efforts to discredit Wallace’s racial politics conflicted with the facts. In the 1930s, the Department of Commerce under Secretary of Agriculture Wallace actively worked for integration. White’s effort to distance himself and his organization from the politics of the Progressive Party reflected the NAACP’s embrace of Cold War liberalism rather than its racial politics, and this shift left more progressive NAACP activists in the lurch. Even though the NAACP attempted to purge itself of Communists, it still faced red-baiting and repression by both the House Un-American Activities Committee and southern authorities.

Cooper’s FBI investigators noted that she was an NAACP member as well as a Communist and Progressive Party activist, suggesting an association among the three. Notations of Cooper’s membership in a variety of distinct organizations in part reflected the FBI’s efforts to create a monolithic notion of Communism by disregarding the distinctions between the mainstream Black freedom movement and the political left. What the Bureau’s notations neglected was that a passionate and engaged individual like Cooper with a strong sense of her own ideas could hold multiple memberships to very different organizations without the existence of a direct collaboration among the organizations themselves. Her allegiances to organizations in conflict with one another reflected her position on her own political independence.

105 Carol Anderson, *Eyes off the Prize*, 119.
106 Ibid., 121.
107 Esther Cooper FBI files, DE 100-16825, 3.
After Wallace’s defeat in the 1948 election, Cooper joined the Civil Rights Congress for a short time before the family moved to New York City. In the wake of a changing political backdrop, the Civil Rights Congress filled a void in leftist Black activists’ political lives. In 1946, the CRC grew out of the National Negro Congress, the International Labor Defense, and the National Federation for Constitutional Civil Liberties, and the government took immediate note of the organization’s Communist influence. Hoping to revisit its 1930s heyday when the Party won the admiration of Blacks for its role in the Scottsboro defense, Communists encouraged the CRC to “become a defense organization fashioned along similar but broader lines than the now defunct International Labor Defense.” The organization focused on egregious legal assaults against African Americans, particularly cases in which Black men were falsely accused of raping white women. Though its goals were similar to the NAACP in the larger political scheme, including its advocacy of voting rights and its fight against housing and job discrimination, the CRC’s inclusion of Communists distanced it from the Association. CRC leader William Patterson tried to assure NAACP leader Roy Wilkins that his organization was non-partisan and urged that the two organizations should unite, but “Wilkins was not buying.”

The historian Gerald Horne has suggested that the CRC sought to include women’s leadership on an equal basis, but from Cooper’s experience, it is clear that the organization did not quite provide the support that the SNYC had for activist mothers.

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110 Ibid., 201.
111 Horne, *Communist Front?*
Cooper lamented that she missed several important meetings for the CRC because of a “lack of cooperation...on the baby sitting problem,” and said that she had only taken the post because the other leaders in the CRC had offered to help.\textsuperscript{112} By early 1949, Cooper was one of two full-time staff members for the Detroit CRC. Campaigns she promoted through the organization included the defense of the Trenton Six, Rosa Lee Ingram, and the initial twelve Communist leaders indicted under the Smith Act.\textsuperscript{113}

Cooper saw the organization as an outlet for her racial activism, and hoped the CRC could remain an independent political organization. She was frustrated by the fact that, though the CRC and the Michigan Communist Party were aligned in many political scenarios, “there was a lack of understanding shown by Party members on the fact that the Communist Party and the CRC are two distinct organizations.”\textsuperscript{114} By working between the groups, she likely hoped each would benefit equally from their mutual association. The distinction she made about each group’s independence was not a result of any anxiety over the political side effects of Communist influence; rather, Cooper was adept at reinforcing the Popular Front notion that an organization’s association with the

\textsuperscript{112} McDuffie; Esther Cooper FBI Files, DE 100-16825, p 10.
\textsuperscript{113} Rosa Lee Ingram was a Black Georgia woman who, along with her two teenaged sons, was sentenced to execution on January 26, 1948 for the death of her white neighbor, John Stratford. Stratford, angry because Ingram’s mules and pigs had wandered to his farm, brutally beat Ingram when she came to drive her animals back. Three of Ingram’s sons witnessed the beating, and the oldest intervened, grabbing Stratford’s gun and striking him on the head with it in a fatal blow. Ingram and her sons were tried by an all-white jury, and after outrage among African Americans across the nation, the death sentences were converted to life in prison.

On January 27, 1948, in Trenton, New Jersey, a white husband and wife were attacked in their store. William Horner, the husband, died. His wife described the three assailants as “white or light-skinned Blacks.” Police subsequently picked up six Black men, only one of whom, James Thorpe, was light-skinned. Thorpe had one arm, and would have been easily identified by that characteristic. The trial of the six men lasted fifty-five days, and all were sentenced to die. Most of the men were eventually released after new trials and international outrage, but not before police officers brutalized Trenton’s Black neighborhoods.

In each of these cases, the Civil Rights Congress played a role in the defense. On Ingram, see Herbert Aptheker, \textit{A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States}, Volume 5, 400-406. On the Trenton Six, see Horne, \textit{Communist Front?}, 131-154.
\textsuperscript{114} Esther Cooper FBI Files, DE 100-16825, p 10.
Party was not subversive, but efficacious and often coincidental. The complaint Cooper leveled in her discussion with an informant likely bolstered the Bureau’s case against the Party, reifying the image of it as a virus that overtook anything in proximity. The FBI was interested neither in distinguishing between the CRC and the Party nor in giving credence to Cooper’s efforts to do so.

As an individual, Cooper’s political expression during her time in Detroit outwardly defied the rising anticommunist anxiety. Her activism reflected her confident and nuanced ability to distinguish between and navigate different organizations with similar goals. Her work also distinguished her political views from her husband’s, although the FBI, and even, occasionally, the Party, saw Cooper as a Communist first and a mother, wife, and activist in other organizations second. Cooper and Jackson had developed open and respectful lines of communication through their wartime correspondence, and though they had differences of opinion, it did not create a deep divide within their marriage.

Cold War politics defined individuals like Cooper and Jackson and organizations like the SNYC, Progressive Party, and CRC by their proximity to the CPUSA, not by the intent of their political goals. In the increasingly tense political climate of the late 1940s, Cooper and Jackson decided it would be best to move to New York City. There, Jackson planned to work fulltime for the national CPUSA and the pair would raise their daughters in a more open-minded city. Unfortunately, shortly after moving to New York, James Jackson was included in the second round of Smith Act indictments. The vision the couple shared for their postwar future on that dock in New York as Cooper returned from Europe was short-lived, but their determination to fight for change was unceasing. For
Cooper and Jackson, resisting the government’s efforts to paint Communist and progressive goals as subversive was not only full-time work, it as also self-preservation.
CHAPTER 4
“The FBI Has Decided to Take It Out on the Children and Wife”
Esther Cooper Jackson, Family, and the Black Freedom Movement in the Early Cold War

On June 20, 1951, four-year-old Kathy Jackson’s father, Communist leader James Jackson, disappeared, and her nightmares became reality. Her mother’s hand would tighten around hers when they spotted FBI agents in dark trench coats and fedoras as they walked in their Brooklyn neighborhood. Her mother’s normally pleasant Virginia accent turned harsh when she picked up the telephone and heard an unfamiliar voice. Fully suited men watching her play in the summertime proved an uncomfortable and awkward experience for Kathy. These FBI agents so terrified Kathy when they approached her on the streets that she refused to let her mother leave her side after interacting with them.¹ She asked her mother, “They can’t put little children in jail, can they?”² Her big sister, eight-year-old Harriet, was tougher. She could draw strength from memories of her father that Kathy had not yet acquired. Harriet understood that her activist parents often faced struggles like this, and she “contemptuously pointed [the FBI agents] out to her playmates.”³ Esther Cooper Jackson could not answer her younger daughter’s questions about where her father went or when he’d be back, most simply because she, like other wives of disappeared Communist husbands, did not know. She could only explain that he had vanished because he was trying to make a better future for his daughters and children across the country, and the people in charge wanted to stop him.

³ Ibid.
Kathy quickly learned that the nation’s highest law enforcement officers did not concern themselves with her protection. Rather, they were out to scare little children into betraying their families, haunt their imaginations, and let them know that, whatever their fathers had done wrong, the children would pay the price. Esther Cooper Jackson believed that the FBI agents were “particularly vindictive toward us because we’re Negroes.”4 She and her family had left the Deep South in 1947, where their efforts to change the racial order were met with both a white supremacist and anticommunist backlash. On arriving and becoming active in Detroit, Cooper Jackson had witnessed the way anticommunism in a Northern city shaped the experiences of its Black residents, who sought to improve their political and economic conditions through union organization and protest. By the time she and her family moved to New York City in 1950 and her husband disappeared a year later, Cooper Jackson fully understood the consequences of the early Cold War and McCarthyism on the Black freedom movement and on her family’s wellbeing.

This chapter explores how tangled notions of liberal democracy in the early 1950s resulted in the undemocratic treatment of the families of Communists and fellow travelers, and had a particular influence on the way activists approached the Black freedom movement. The domestic effects of Cold War politics shaped the Black freedom movement specifically by shaping the family lives of Black activists. For Esther Cooper Jackson and her two daughters, the early Cold War represented an era of unparalleled fear and repression, but the injustice of the period motivated and empowered them to continue to work for change. Cooper Jackson’s efforts to defend her husband’s political rights and protect her family’s welfare were not only linked to each other, but were also

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4 Ibid, 10.
an essential component of the Black freedom movement and the activist ideology the
Jacksons had developed over the course of their lives.

Esther Cooper Jackson employed the democratic idea of family and the changing
Black freedom movement to seek justice for her husband. In an era when images of
idealized nuclear families reinforced anticommunist liberalism, Cooper Jackson exposed
the devastating effect political repression had on her family. In addition, James Jackson’s
disappearance and the subsequent treatment of his family were symptomatic of a larger
change in the struggle against racial injustice. In other words, the way that the United
States undermined a critical element of the Black freedom movement in the early Cold
War shaped the particular form of civil rights activism that gained popularity in the late
1950s. The Jackson family’s experiences tell that story.

On June 20, 1951, James Jackson was indicted under the Smith Act for
“conspiracy to teach or advocate the violent overthrow of the government.” The Smith
Act, a peacetime sedition law, was originally passed in 1940 as the Alien Registration
Act. The Smith Act allowed the government to pursue activists who discussed
“overthrowing the government by ‘force and violence,’” and deport “aliens who had once
belonged to an organization that advocated force and violence.”5 Instead of standing trial
immediately in a potentially dangerous political climate, Jackson went underground until
1956, and his family became victims of constant FBI harassment. Esther Cooper
Jackson, who took her husband’s last name after ten years of marriage in order to support
him, led efforts for her husband’s defense by working with the Smith Act Victims
Families Committee and the National Committee to Defend Negro Leadership. She did

not know where her husband was and had no contact with him for the five years they were apart.

Popular Front politics had reached their nadir by the time James Jackson was indicted. Since World War II, acting on radical ideas had become increasingly difficult in the United States. Loyalty oath programs led government employees to either hide questionable political affiliations or face removal from their positions. Twelve top-tier Communist Party leaders had already been indicted, tried, and convicted over the course of 1948 and 1949. Two years later, the Supreme Court upheld their convictions in *U.S. v. Dennis*, a ruling that prompted Jackson and others to become fugitives. In Birmingham, a former center of the southern Popular Front civil rights movement, the City Commission “unanimously passed an ordinance on July 18, 1950, that decreed the outlawing of the Communist Party and all liberal and progressive organizations.” The ordinance was not unique to the Magic City; similar local laws gained popularity in Gary, Indiana; Peoria, Illinois; Chattanooga, Tennessee; Atlanta, Georgia and other major and minor industrial hubs across the country.\(^6\)

One progressive organization distributed a fact sheet emphasizing the ordinance’s negative impact on civil rights organizing in Birmingham by pointing out that it was first introduced by Police Commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor.\(^7\) Connor had already gained notoriety in Birmingham for his role in the Southern Negro Youth Congress’s demise. The fact sheet connected Connor’s racism to anticommunism, stating:

> For the past several years police killings of Negro citizens in Birmingham has averaged 16 to 19 annually…The Ku Klux Klan operates boldly under the

\(^6\) “BIRMINGHAM’S FASCIST ORDINANCE, OUTLAWING THE COMMUNIST PARTY,” James and Esther Cooper Jackson Papers, Box 14 Folder 3, Tamiment Library, New York University.

\(^7\) It is likely that the organization remained unnamed in an effort to shield itself from persecution in the face of the law it criticized.
umbrella of Connor’s Dixiecrat protection. Connor started his tenure of office in the 1930s by attempting to stop the organizing drive of the CIO. In his recent unsuccessful campaign for governor of Alabama, he based his appeal on anti-Negro and anti-Communist prejudice…It aims at giving the lynchers carte blanche.\(^8\)

In the South, conservative forces linked the Communist Party’s long effort to court Black activists with the fight against Jim Crow, effectively driving the Popular Front’s civil rights organizing and unionization efforts out of business.\(^9\) The connection between anticommunism and racism went beyond Party-influenced groups as well, forcing moderate and liberal civil rights activists to downplay any economic solution to racial problems. In other words, white supremacists equated access to equal opportunities across racial lines with communism, and appropriated the new context of the Cold War to uphold segregation. While there were some radical groups that remained active, including the Southern Conference Educational Fund, organizations across the left were weakened.\(^10\) Coupled with the indictments of Communist leaders and the nationwide panic over any form of social critique that remotely resembled socialism, even activists who had no direct ties with the CP often faded into quiet conformity.

Many histories of the early Cold War’s effect on activists focus on individuals with loose ties to communist-influenced organizations or on those who plainly refused to cooperate with political repression in the United States. Hollywood writers and actors, outspoken newspaper editors, union organizers, gays and lesbians, and individuals who

\(^8\) “BIRMINGHAM’S FASCIST ORDINANCE, OUTLAWING THE COMMUNIST PARTY,” James and Esther Cooper Jackson Papers, Box 14 Folder 3, Tamiment Library, New York University.


had been involved in an array of civil rights and Popular Front activism were questioned and persecuted for their political ideals and social positions.\textsuperscript{11} FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover wrote that each of these groups was susceptible to communist “thought control.” He argued, “The result of this manipulation, as applied to diverse personalities, groups, and issues, is a tribute to the communists’ deceitful skill. By this technique, using its own membership as a base, the Party today is influencing literally thousands of Americans.”\textsuperscript{12}

Hoover and the FBI also targeted people who had once been members of the Communist Party but had since withdrawn. British immigrant Cedric Belfrage, the longtime editor of the leftist newspaper, \textit{The National Guardian}, was deported along with his ex-wife for his political beliefs and for his paper’s uncompromising support for political and civil liberties. His daughter wrote in her memoir of the fifties, “The minute anybody becomes a truly unspeakable pariah, you can bet my father’s in there sticking up for them.” In spite of those who believed that the \textit{Guardian} was “a propaganda arm of the Kremlin,” Belfrage and the paper were often in conflict with the Communist Party, USA. Belfrage wrote that the CPUSA’s “private war against us…was waged vigorously…The going was rough with the political group that we had resolved to defend


as a matter of principle, but we were surer than ever of the principle: keeping our eye on
the real enemy."13 Belfrage was deported in 1955 for working with organizations labeled
subversive while he was “an alien.”14 Evidence against him included a Hollywood
screenwriter’s assertion that he knew Belfrage was a Communist in 1937 and that he had
traveled to Russia during the 1930s on several occasions.

Others were similarly firm about their democratic right to hold minority political
positions, and though their actual connections to the Communist Party were murky, this
decision often proved costly. Canada Lee, the Black actor best known for his portrayal of
Bigger Thomas in Native Son, died in 1952 of kidney failure. Some of his close friends
and family attributed his illness to the stress of being blacklisted. He had lost some work
as a performer because of his political affiliations. The New York Herald Tribune wrote
that Lee “stoutly denied” being a Communist, but that he had “lent his name in the past to
some organizations which appeared subsequently on the Attorney General’s subversive
list, but he declared that he had done so only because they were anti-Nazi or anti-fascist
groups and were ‘working for the civil rights of my people.’”15 As with many others who
faced persecution in the early Cold War, Lee’s politics were similar to most progressive
activists in the Depression and World War II era. The Popular Front aligned activists in
the 1930s and 1940s in ways that became unacceptable in the 1950s.

As the historian Andrea Friedman points out, many of McCarthyism’s victims
were not serious, career Communists, but individuals with a casual interest in an

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13 Belfrage, 115-117. The Guardian’s conflict with the CPUSA was long-standing, and derived from the
paper’s refusal to consistently support the Party ideology, even though it supported the Party’s right to
political liberty. Sally Belfrage writes on page 116, “The CP’s fury peaked in 1949-50 when the Guardian
defended Anna Louise Strong, an American radical journalist, after the Russians accused her of spying; and
until Stalin’s death in 1953 there was party animosity over the paper’s siding with Tito against the Soviet
Union.”
14 Ibid., 227.
15 Smith, Becoming Something, 350.
organization who might have attended a few meetings or paid occasional dues. Annie Lee Moss, a Black cafeteria worker in Washington DC whose HUAC inquiry was televised on Edward R. Morrow’s *See It Now*, was most likely “attracted [to communism] by its social and economic justice politics.” Moss, like many others who faced or feared persecution for their politics, did little beyond expressing sympathy and solidarity for ideals that she had developed during the Great Depression and World War II. By the time of her HUAC investigation, Moss felt it necessary to deny even understanding the basics of communism, despite her prior activism with community organizations and unions. This tactic not only distanced her from the intellectual and theoretical underpinnings of a movement scorned, it pegged her as a pitiable pawn. Moss did not appear to be an agent in her own political empowerment. Her mode of defense presented her as a mere dupe who fell for an abstract promise of equality.\(^\text{16}\) This method of responding to McCarthyism generated sympathy for the presumably innocent victims of government harassment. It also points to the extent of fear of communism and the scope of the FBI’s reach into the lives of ordinary citizens.

The leadership of the Communist Party bore more guilt in the eyes of the public than celebrities and other individuals who were simply guilty by association. After all, Party leaders were charged with violating a specific law, the Smith Act, and were seen as responsible for, as J. Edgar Hoover put it, “[trying] to poison our thinking about the issues of the day: social reforms, peace, politics, veterans’, womens’, and youth problems.”\(^\text{17}\) It was not difficult for J. Edgar Hoover, Joseph McCarthy, and others to rally support around the Smith Act. On June 25, 1950, Soviet-equipped North Korea

\(^{17}\) Hoover, 82.
invaded U.S.-backed South Korea, making it the peninsula the first hot spot of the Cold War. The U.S. military responded with a “police action” that lasted for more than 3 years. In addition, many associated the leadership of the CPUSA with the nation’s worst fear: atomic espionage. In a concrete example, the trial and execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg from 1950 to 1953 reminded Americans that they stood on the brink of disaster because of homegrown Communists.

James Jackson had become Southern Regional Director of the Communist Party in 1949. By virtue of the fact that nearly all Party activities were outlawed and stigmatized, he and his fellow CPUSA leaders were easy targets for the government’s crusade against domestic subversion. Jackson’s indictment for “conspiracy to teach or advocate the overthrow of the government by force or violence,” though, does not adequately define or describe any of his activities. As discussed in chapter 1, Jackson’s political ideas grew out of his upbringing, his exposure to people of varying social and economic circumstances, and his passion for the Black freedom movement. He advocated changing the way the United States operated on behalf of its citizens, but he never suggested force or violence as a means.

As Gil Green, one of the CP leaders prosecuted in the first round of trials, declared, “we were not even charged with actual teaching and advocacy, only with conspiring—that is, agreeing—to do so. And the conspiracy consisted (according to the government) of our being members and leaders of the Communist Party and believing and teaching the social theory of Marxism-Leninism.” On the beliefs of the CP, Green argued:

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As we saw it, socialism would come to this country as the end result of a long, difficult, and many sided struggle to extend democratic rights—economic, political, and social…we held that the victory of such a new political force could bring about major social and economic reforms aimed at so curbing the excessive power of the corporate ultra-rich that, in time, a relatively peaceful transition to a socialist society could be made. Violence had no place in our projection, though we warned of the danger that violence would be used by entrenched power to thwart the will of the majority.\(^\text{19}\)

The concepts that Green described do not adequately match the charges against the Communist leaders. But at the height of the Cold War, rumors about the Soviet Union’s power – that the Red Army could travel through Alaska and Canada to obliterate Detroit and so on – generated such fear of communism as an ideology that the indicted leaders stood no chance of a fair trial.\(^\text{20}\)

The twelve CP leaders who were initially convicted under the Smith Act were awaiting sentencing when the indictments of 126 additional individuals, including 21 “second-string” Communist leaders came up in 1951.\(^\text{21}\) The hostile political atmosphere intensified when the Supreme Court upheld the initial convictions in U.S. v. Dennis. The decision led the CP leadership to create the “second cadre,” which would operate underground and would include some of the high-level leaders facing prosecution and prison. Of the initial twelve who were sentenced, only seven – Benjamin Davis, Jr., Eugene Dennis, John Gates, Irving Potash, Jack Stachel, John Williamson, and Carl Winter – appeared immediately to serve their time. William Z. Foster’s case had been severed from the original twelve because of his failing health. The remaining four – Gus Hall, Robert Thompson, Henry Winston, and Gil Green – went underground and were


\(^{20}\) Ibid., 35.

known by the CPUSA community as “unavailables.” Among the second-stringers, Fred Fine, William Norman Marron, Sidney Steinberg, and James Jackson “had not been at home when the FBI showed up.”

They disappeared before standing trial.

The FBI launched a massive search for the missing men. News articles urged citizens “to join in the intense manhunt for the eight Communist leaders.” Every democracy-loving American was “in a position to assist the FBI in locating and capturing the Red fugitives.”

For the CP, creating the second cadre to operate underground was a viable, if difficult, alternative to having so many top leaders incarcerated. The CP also saw the heightened political repression as fascist, and, as Gil Green put it, “with the war still on in Korea, the atomic spy scare, the frenzy to outlaw the Party, we cannot exclude a further growth of reaction.”

Putting some of the indicted and convicted key Communists into the second cadre meant that if the remaining leadership faced indictment or incarceration in the increasingly hostile political environment, a group of experienced party functionaries could remain in covert action.

Whether or not it was ultimately productive, the second cadre and their families made reasoned political moves in the McCarthy Era given their situations. James and Esther Jackson had envisioned a postwar world in which they would be able to unite the South under a left wing, interracial, labor-oriented NAACP. They imagined the double victory campaign would be realized through socialist-influenced economic reform, political equality, and social integration. The wartime alliance with the Soviet Union would continue, and the harnessing of nuclear power for peaceful means would allow for limitless productivity and reduced capitalist competition. It appeared to many

22 Green, Cold War Fugitive, 68-69.
23 Ibid., 69.
24 Ibid., 59.
Communists that a golden age was approaching. While they knew it would not be without difficulties, few anticipated the conservative backlash that drove so many of them underground. The second cadre and its support system of wives, children, and extended family served to keep alive some of the hope of the World War II years.

For the families of the second cadre, McCarthyism introduced an era of fear that was worlds apart from the anxiety about communism most Americans felt. The FBI waged a “war of nerves” against the families of Smith Act defendants.²⁵ Tactics included surveillance, harassment, subtle threats, and actual interference in family members’ abilities to sustain their incomes, homes, cars, and any semblance of a normal life. Although these tactics proved ineffective at information gathering and did not result in apprehending any of the unavailables, harassing family members caused psychological damage and made the FBI appear to the public as though it was making progress toward halting an underground army of Communists ready to overthrow the United States government. Still, FBI harassment engendered substantial opposition from activist groups on the left, and these groups were often comprised of friends, family, and acquaintances of the unavailables. Esther Cooper Jackson and other activists recast questions of political affiliation and national loyalty as issues of race, gender, and class coercion that were contrary to the nuclear family-oriented language of liberal postwar democracy.

The rhetoric of family life, suburban bliss, and the comfort of traditional gender roles characterized portrayals of democracy in the early Cold War. Divorce rates dropped along with the average age of marriage, suburbs expanded, and birth rates increased. For white Americans, an attainable suburban ideal emerged because of better

²⁵ Ibid., 71.
mortgage opportunities, new housing developments, and widespread availability.

Residential segregation, however, excluded Black Americans from much of the postwar suburban dream. While Black women were not represented in expressions of this new American ideal, they still had to contend with the cultural expectations for women and with aspirations for middle class normativity.  

The government also employed these new gender constructions in its ideological war on communism. In 1956, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover declared that in the fight against “crime and communism…there are no careers as important as those of homemaker and mother.” Hoover’s assertion was rooted in a solidly middle-class analysis, as it assumed that mothers could afford not to have a career other than homemaker. Vice President Richard Nixon echoed that sentiment in 1959 during his “Kitchen Debate” with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, when he stated that America’s effort “to make easier the life of our housewives” was a common and democratic ideal across the globe. Targeting the suburban middle class’s gender ideals became a simple way for politicians to gain support for their side in a complicated ideological struggle.

In the eyes of law enforcement and the mainstream public, James Jackson and his comrades’ political ideologies overshadowed their family devotion. How could these men, who had abandoned their families and fled from justice, share any democratic ideals with the average American, whose capitalist consumption represented their political stance and their family values? Jackson’s alleged crime and disappearance was portrayed
as a heinous assault on U.S. democracy, and his family became a unique tool in both the FBI’s pursuit of him and in his defense. Although his family did not see or hear from him for nearly five years, the FBI left no member of the extended Jackson and Cooper families alone. In spite of the federal government’s emphasis on nuclear families as a line of defense against the Soviets, the FBI actively sought to tear communist nuclear families apart.

The FBI was intent on the notion that perpetual harassment would either force family members to admit contact with a fugitive or force the fugitives out of hiding to spare their families any psychological trauma. Or perhaps it believed tormenting children would turn families against the unavailables, breaking family loyalty by implicitly suggesting that the fugitives were, themselves, disloyal to their loved ones. Keeping in close proximity to the families of unavailables illustrated to the public that the FBI was being persistent in its quest for the missing Communists. Yet many family members of the unavailables protested these tactics, first because they were both unable and unwilling to inform on their loved ones, and second because the tactics were plainly unjust. Having a more nuanced understanding of her husband’s actions, Esther Cooper Jackson knew, like many other Smith Act victim family members, that political ideals and the future of her family were intimately connected. James Jackson’s disappearance was not a question of family versus party; rather, his time underground reflected his hope for a better future for his children.

The FBI spent nearly one million dollars a year maintaining staff to tail Smith Act families.\(^{28}\) Agents regularly forced their way into homes, intimidated neighbors, and destroyed their victims’ abilities to maintain jobs. In one instance, Fred Fine’s son, 6-

year-old Larry, was targeted in his classroom. Agents followed the family all the time, taking photos and forbidding them any privacy. One day, Larry Fine’s principal came into his class with an FBI agent and asked the teacher to point the child out. His mother, Doris, commented, “As if they didn’t know what he looked like! They took enough pictures of him this summer – yes, and his playmates too – they had him afraid to go out of the cottage where we were staying. Maybe they went to his classroom because they expected to find his father under his desk! No, they just wanted to frighten him some more.” She continued, “They think they can break us down this way and make us tell them where our husbands are. As if we knew!” Agents used intimidation tactics with adults connected to these children as well. Smith Act children were routinely denied admission to summer camps because camp administrators feared an FBI presence would frighten other children.

The FBI also inflicted financial difficulty on the wives of second cadre members. Lillian Green faced harassment at work and in her everyday life. The FBI also contacted her car insurance company, which subsequently canceled her policy. Without insurance, Green saw little point in keeping the car and decided to sell it for some much-needed income. The FBI caught wind of the potential sale, intimidated prospective buyers, and when Green finally brought someone to see the car, “she found a large spoke imbedded in a tire.” Green could neither keep nor sell the car.

Beyond these covert tactics, the FBI used outright threats. For Green, the threat came when she was looking after her three children and her brother’s two children at a summer cottage. FBI agents entered the cottage, and after Green implored them to leave,

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29 Ibid.
30 Ibid; see also Gil Green, *Cold War Fugitive*.
31 Green, *Cold War Fugitive*, 80.
they refused and said, “We don’t use guns much…but sometimes a man we’re hunting gets shot. Now you wouldn’t want that to happen to your husband, would you?”

James Jackson’s mother, Clara, received a similarly threatening call from FBI agents. After telling them repeatedly that she did not know where her son was, agents pressed harder. “Supposing your husband were to drop dead tonight, how would you get in touch with your son to let him know?” they asked. While they did not directly threaten harm against James Jackson, Sr., the menacing call itself suggested to Clara Jackson that the FBI might go to even greater lengths to ferret the fugitives out of hiding.

In response to FBI harassment, the families of the unavailables formed the Families Committee of Smith Act Victims. The organization was comprised predominantly of women whose husbands faced prosecution, and they worked “to give financial, material, and emotional assistance to the children and spouses of the Smith Act victims and the prisoners themselves.” Sociologist Deborah Gerson argues that, “the Families Committee resisted state repression with a strategy that made use of the valorization of family. The alliance between patriotism and familialism was challenged by women who pointed to the state as the destroyer of family freedom, security, and happiness.”

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32 Kahn, The Game of Death, 156.
33 Kahn, “Vengeance on the Young” 11.
34 Gerson,151.
35 Gerson, 153-154. The Families Committee was an effective avenue for many activists who had built families as they engaged in social justice movements. For some Communists, having children conflicted with activism. William Z. Foster, one of the indicted leaders, had no children of his own with his wife Esther (who did have two children from a prior relationship) because he “had been influenced by the French syndicalist notion that children inhibited the actions of militants and furnished the capitalist with a ‘new supply of slaves.’” Devoted Communists often had personal conflicts about how to incorporate children into their activist lives, but many, like Cooper Jackson and the others involved in the Families Committee, prioritized a “normal” life for their children, as much as possible. See James R. Barrett, William Z. Foster and the Tragedy of American Radicalism, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Peggy Dennis, The Autobiography of an American Communist: A Personal View of Political Life, 1925-1975, (Westport: Lawrence Hill/Creative Arts, 1977).
wives and mothers with an opportunity to become more politically empowered by taking
hold of their families’ fates.

Historian Kate Weigand’s work on the CPUSA and the women’s movement
points to a gap between the lives of party wives and party gender ideology. While the
CPUSA’s position on “the Woman Question” called for gender equity and opposition to
male chauvinism, many Communist men had difficulty treating their wives as equals.
After the war, when the Party began to discuss the woman question further, Party women
believed that they would make strides in achieving their liberation. But, like women
across the country in these years, “The demanding realities of family life during the
postwar baby boom quickly brought many young Communist women to the realization
that as wives—and especially as mothers—their ability to participate in the political and
social life of their Party was actually more restricted than before.”
Nonetheless, in an
atmosphere of escalating Cold War tension, some Party women found an avenue for
activism in caring for families and normative gender roles. The establishment of the
Families Committee transformed the ideas of maternal responsibility into a liberating
political force for Party women.

Race also gave meaning to Cooper Jackson’s political activism on behalf of her
family. The historian Ruth Feldstein writes that in the 1950s, it was “through [the]
rendering of politics as personal and psychological that the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ mother—
black and white—did political work in the reconfiguration of liberalism.”
Cooper
Jackson confronted cultural expectations that required a “good” Black mother to be loyal

36 Kate Weigand, Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women’s Liberation,
(Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 70.
37 Ruth Feldstein, Motherhood in Black and White: Race and Sex in American Liberalism, 1930-1965,
wife, a patriotic citizen, emotional, and active on behalf of her race. These ideals conflicted in Cooper Jackson’s situation. She could not simultaneously be construed as patriotic and loyal to her husband, who had fled the justice system. She could not exemplify patriotism and remain active on behalf of her race through organizations that supported her loyalty to her fugitive husband. Her children needed a mother who was strong and composed, not effusively emotional. Cooper Jackson navigated the cultural requirements for a Black wife and mother as a victim of governmental harassment and as an activist who fought for a United States that embodied its own rhetoric of democracy.

The FBI’s assault on the Jackson family was not only contrary to the “valorization of family,” but also a hindrance to many other progressive movements. As discussed in chapter 1, for the Jacksons, the Communist Party offered a path to racial justice and had long been an essential component of the Black freedom movement. Though activists like Cooper Jackson acknowledged the importance of the postwar civil rights advancements organized by the NAACP, she also saw her unique family circumstances as indicative of widespread setbacks in progressive movements.

Cooper Jackson’s increasingly distant relationship with mainstream civil rights organizations like the NAACP was shaped by the early Cold War. The NAACP never worked with the CPUSA on an organizational level, and never sought to radically overhaul the government. The Scottsboro case offers one stark illustration of the conflict

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38 Ibid., 92-94. Feldstein discusses the way in which Mamie Till Bradley, mother of 14-year-old Mississippi murder victim Emmett Till, represented an ideal of “good” Black motherhood. Bradley, a World War II widow, feared “that [Emmett Till’s] murder would be used by the Communists for anti-American propaganda.” Bradley’s patriotism made her loss more profound, as her husband had died serving “the American proposition that all men are equal,” and her son’s murder was a reflection of the war’s failure to realize democracy for African Americans. Bradley’s embodiment of “good” Black motherhood in the wake of her son’s murder energized the Civil Rights struggle and garnered sympathy among liberal whites and northerners. See also May, *Homeward Bound*; K.A. Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005).
between the two groups as early as the 1930s. In similar incidents the NAACP and the left clashed over the handling of rape cases. Willie McGee was charged with raping a white woman after he called off an affair that she had initiated in 1945. The left-wing Civil Rights Congress came to his defense, and the NAACP steered clear of the case. The Supreme Court refused to hear McGee’s appeal, and he was executed on May 8, 1951. The Martinsville Seven, another group of young Black men, were executed in 1951 for raping a white woman. The CRC again defended the Seven, but they had confessed to police officers. In 1951, W.E.B. Du Bois and CRC leader William Patterson submitted an essay titled, “We Charge Genocide” to the United Nations. It made note of the Martinsville Seven, alongside many other Black men who were subject to racial violence, lynching, and unjust executions in the U.S. The NAACP’s national prominence nonetheless drew Black activists of a wide array of political positions, including Communists.

In the 1930s, the NAACP advocated policies that would benefit poor people of all races. Concern with issues of poverty aligned the Association politically with the CPUSA, but also connected it with many federal New Deal programs, which reflected the NAACP’s longstanding pattern of working within existing political structures. In other words, the situation created by the sheer economic despair of the Great Depression required solutions that addressed the issue of poverty, and a wide array of organizations, along with the federal government, responded to that need. Rather than championing its

position as one of interracial working-class unity like Popular Front organizations did, the
Association advocated its policies as integrationist. The distinction illustrated that the
NAACP saw African Americans not “as part of an exploited working class…[but] as an
oppressed racial minority.”

Many Black activists saw powerful, promising, and
effective elements in both the NAACP and the CPUSA, and the Popular Front had
allowed Black activists to engage ideas from both organizations in ways that suited their
goals.

In the postwar years, the NAACP needed to distinguish itself from the Left in a
much clearer ideological way. The NAACP was part of many progressive activists’
résumés, but in order to keep functioning as a liberal organization, the Association
followed suit with the government’s embodiment of Cold War liberalism. The NAACP
had always distanced itself from Communist ideas and embraced the distinctions between
itself and the CPUSA, but never was it more important to highlight those differences than
in the early Cold War. As the McCarthy Era took hold, Black activists who had worked
toward civil rights in the Popular Front years needed to choose between groups that
incorporated Marxist influence and groups that worked within the existing political
system, like the NAACP. The path between no longer existed.

When James Jackson
went underground, his wife saw his absence and the assault on his Communist political
ideals as detrimental to the Black freedom movement. While the NAACP’s postwar
achievements were significant, Cooper Jackson believed that the greatest opportunity to

40 Manfred Berg, “Black Civil Rights and Liberal Anticommunism: The NAACP in the Early Cold War,”
41 Ibid. See also: Carol Anderson, Eyes Off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American
Plummer, Rising Wind.
defend her husband and the struggle for racial equality existed in groups that fought the dominant political rejection of communism instead of embracing it.

Esther Cooper Jackson saw the FBI’s tactics not only as an assault on an ideal of American family, but also as a distinct attack on the Black freedom movement. Joining forces with the Families Committee and the National Committee to Defend Negro Leadership, Cooper Jackson’s work created a nexus between the two movements. The Black freedom movement in the early Cold War and the movement to protect the families of persecuted activists could not have been more relevant to one another, and in highlighting this interconnection, Cooper Jackson illustrated the contradictions between the federal government’s enforcement of civil rights and its pursuit of political fugitives. The time and money the FBI devoted to harassing Smith Act families in the name of democracy was counterbalanced by the federal agency’s limited resources to enforce equal justice, a powerful symbol of that very democracy. The investigation of the murder of civil rights leader Harry T. Moore provides a case in point. Cooper Jackson demonstrated the contradiction between the FBI’s inconsequential Moore investigation and its constant harassment of her family. In so doing, she attempted to connect the welfare of her children with the advancement of the Black freedom movement.

On Christmas evening in 1951, after Florida state NAACP leader Harry T. Moore and his family had gone to sleep in the small town of Mims, an explosion rocked the household. It was loud enough to be heard four miles away. The bomb had been placed underneath the house by members of the Ku Klux Klan, and Moore died before Christmas was over. His wife, Harriette, died of injuries sustained in the blast a day after her husband’s funeral. Though the explosion jolted neighbors out of bed, bombings had
become a common occurrence in Florida in 1951. Between August of that year and Christmas, twelve separate bundles of dynamite had delivered “the Florida Terror” to a Black housing project, synagogues, Catholic churches, a Black high school, and a white-owned ice cream shop, to name a few. Any individual or group that fought for social justice, racial equality, or progressive change in Florida came to fear the Ku Klux Klan’s retributive violence.42

Most people who commented on the murder agreed that Moore’s role in the defense of three young Black men accused of raping a white woman was the impetus for the bombing. In Groveland, Florida, in 1949, a seventeen-year-old white woman alleged that four young Black men had abducted and raped her. A doctor who examined her declared that her accusations were false. One of the accused, Ernest Thomas, fled the scene and was shot over a week after the incident. The three remaining young men were known as “Florida’s Little Scottsboro,” and their case drew national attention.43 The white community in Groveland rioted in the aftermath of the rape charge, burning Black neighborhoods and attacking their residents. Moore led efforts to rally the nation around the Groveland Boys and to quell the violence in Florida, arguing, “incidents like these play right into the hands of the communists…we cannot successfully defend ourselves against communist propaganda unless we subdue such undemocratic practices as the recent mob violence in Lake County.”44 The Groveland three were quickly convicted by an all-white jury, but the Supreme Court ordered a new trial on procedural grounds.45 On

44 Green, *Before His Time*, 12; 88.
November 6, 1951, Sheriff Willis McCall shot two of the defendants on the way to their retrials, bringing the tension surrounding the case to new heights. In response, Moore implored that McCall be suspended and indicted for murder.\footnote{Green, *Before His Time*, 12-13.}

The attention Moore received for his vocal critique of the Groveland situation paled in comparison to the attention given to his murder. For a short while, the entire country was in an uproar. The international press editorialized on the Moore murder. The violence in Florida became a tool for North Korean soldiers, who used racial injustice in the United States to interrogate and break down Black prisoners of war. Eleanor Roosevelt acknowledged, “the harm it will do to us among the people of the world is untold.”\footnote{Ibid, 10.}

For the FBI to get involved in the case, proof was needed that the murder was a product of the violation of Moore’s civil rights or that state or county officials had been involved. Without such proof, J. Edgar Hoover hesitated to intervene, but quickly realized that the FBI’s reputation was on the line. Hoover, who preferred to work by the book, needed to set aside his reservations about jurisdiction in order to appease a public on the verge of outrage.\footnote{Ibid, 174-175.} Initially, two agents arrived on the scene and eventually a dozen agents set to work on the case. For Hoover, “a civil rights case with tremendous political and public relations repercussions” meant that jurisdictional concerns needed to be set aside in the interest of solving the case.\footnote{Ibid, 174-175.} The FBI’s official presence did not mean they were visible in the community, however. Although twelve agents were officially
assigned to the case, one researcher who visited the area noted that, “no FBI agents were
to be found in the community.”\textsuperscript{50}

Harry T. Moore’s murder occurred at a distinct moment in Black freedom
movement history. Moore rose to prominence in the late 1930s, becoming the Brevard
County NAACP director in 1934, organizing the state NAACP conference in 1941, and
becoming the paid state Executive Secretary in 1946. In 1944, he organized the
Progressive Voter’s League (PVL), which served as an unofficial political offshoot of the
NAACP geared at voter registration and Black political empowerment. Although Moore
was moderate in his own political practices, he earned the respect of groups like the
Southern Negro Youth Congress. The persecution he confronted for his political
activities resembled the anticommmunist persecution that activists further to the left also
faced. In 1946, he was fired from a teaching job because he was “a trouble maker and
negro organizer.”\textsuperscript{51} He also faced substantial opposition from the national leadership of
the NAACP after a while for his endorsement of Democratic political candidates and his
allegedly divisive politics in the PVL. The NAACP held him responsible for the drop in
membership in Florida and ousted him as its leader a month before his murder.

At the time of Moore’s murder, the Black freedom movement was in a period of
transition, moving toward the liberal position that would characterize the civil rights
years. The Popular Front had clearly met its demise, and the modes of acceptable protest
were changing. Though Moore was no Communist or even fellow traveler, his
outspoken, uncompromising style was more dangerous than the NAACP could bear to
risk. His significant power in Florida’s Black community symbolized a potential for

\textsuperscript{50} Kahn, \textit{The Game Of Death}, 158n.
\textsuperscript{51} Green, \textit{Before His Time}, 61.
change that Florida whites needed to quell. The repression of Black leadership in the early fifties occurred in tandem with the increasing momentum of the anticommunist backlash. In Florida, as with much of the South, there was a coalition of these two movements. Anticommunism and segregationism went hand-in-hand. While Moore’s political positions tended to be more aligned with liberalism, his death generated solidarity across what remained of left and radical political organizations in 1951. Moore’s murder inspired a response from the Civil Rights Congress, the CPUSA, the Socialist Workers Party, and the American Labor Party. For organizations facing political persecution, Moore’s death symbolized the decline of civil and political liberty.

The FBI was a quiet presence in Mims after the murder. National NAACP Executive Secretary Walter White investigated as well, and he offered the leads he discovered to the FBI. The Bureau made little information public, and eventually faced severe criticism for its inability to apprehend the killers. At the 1952 NAACP Convention in Oklahoma City, delegates passed a resolution singling out the FBI for its failure in the Moore case. It asserted that the FBI was “almost invariably unable to cope with violent criminal action by bigoted, prejudiced Americans against Negro Americans.” In the face of this criticism, the FBI apprehended several Orlando KKK members who were indicted on June 3, 1953 for a variety of terrorist acts, but “no mention was made of the Moore bombing except for the fact that it had been investigated.” The defendants’ lawyer, a Klansman, argued the jurisdictional issue, and the indictments were dismissed on January 11, 1954. The Moore case faded from memory.

52 Kelley, Hammer and Hoe.
53 Green, Before His Time, 178.
54 Ibid, 193-197.
The failure of the FBI to apprehend suspects in the Moore bombing and the disappearance of the case from the public eye did not go unnoticed by Esther Cooper Jackson. In the summer of 1951, Cooper Jackson found herself without her husband’s financial or emotional support, and with no idea when he would return. Never the type of woman who feared independence, Cooper Jackson secured a part-time job and set out to enroll 4-year-old Kathy in nursery school. Kathy was admitted to Cleveland Day Nursery in Brooklyn, but within 2 months, she was expelled because her mother allegedly had “undisclosed sources of income.” Cooper Jackson was unable to ascertain the source for this allegation, and could only assume that the FBI agents who had hounded her family since June were to blame. She wrote, “unable to locate their father, the FBI has decided to take it out on the children and wife.” In a letter to the editor of the Union, Cooper Jackson connected her family’s harassment to the Moore situation in Florida. She wrote,

A month has passed and still no arrests in the Christmas night murder of Mr. and Mrs. Harry T. Moor [sic]! A month in which the authorities say an investigation is still taking place yet nothing of significance has been issued by the FBI or the Department of Justice…Why are they so silent? Is it because they are busy elsewhere hounding the families of those very people whose life has been devoted to the things Harry Moor stood for—justice, equality and freedom?...This F.B.I. which utilizes great power and authority to hound young Negro children finds no funds or manpowers to unearth the killers of my people!

The school expulsion generated attention from the Black press, as well. Journalist James L. Hicks of the Baltimore Afro-American printed a front-page article on the issue, referring to the FBI’s failure in the Moore case. He argued, “It looks like some of those eight FBI boys frittering away their time trailing innocent four-year-old children down

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55 “To the Editor of the Readers’ Column,” from Peggy Dennis and Sophie Gerson, James and Esther Jackson Papers, Box 13, Folder 9, Tamiment Library, New York University.
57 Jackson Papers, Box 13, Folder 3.
the streets of Brooklyn could be more profitably employed tracking down bomb-throwing killers in the everglades of Florida.”

Because Cooper Jackson could only maintain the job she had by putting Kathy in the Day Nursery, the suggestion that she had unreported income was baseless. The Day Nursery officials refused to allow Cooper Jackson to appeal the expulsion. In response, she wrote to the editor of the *New York Daily Compass*, stating, “Since keeping [Kathy] in nursery school is the only way I have been able to seek and find employment, the effect of this expulsion order can only be interpreted as an attempt to starve the family and deny the children a chance at a normal life.” As with the denied entrance to summer camps for other Smith Act children, Kathy’s expulsion from Nursery School was a part of the FBI’s efforts to disrupt the families of the unavailables more than a concerted effort to “get its man.”

Until Cooper Jackson took her story to the public in January 1952, the New York Welfare Department flatly refused to help the family. But on hearing the appalling story of a child’s persecution by the FBI, Jackson’s allies sprung to action. The Families Committee of Smith Act Victims organized a response to Kathy’s expulsion, highlighting the connection between political repression and racism. The group sent a delegation of eighteen people to discuss the situation with John H. Lewis, Community Relations director of the New York Welfare Department, who informed the group that Kathy’s case

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58 Kahn, *The Game of Death*, 158.
59 Ibid., 157.
60 Green, *Cold War Fugitive*, 175.
61 See Deborah A. Gerson, “Is Family Devotion Now Subversive?: Familialism against McCarthyism.”
“would be decided without prejudice of color, race, or political belief.” But, as Peggy

Dennis and Sophie Gerson, leaders of the Families Committee, noted:

The father of little Kathy Jackson is Dr. James Jackson, noted Negro Communist leader, who is being sought by the FBI... [J. Edgar] Hoover’s cloak-and-dagger men, in their fruitless efforts to locate the father, have held as virtual political hostages the two small daughters and the wife of Dr. Jackson... Mrs Esther Jackson, as a young Negro woman, had with difficulty found a suitable job and her continuance in that position is contingent upon her daughter’s maintenance in a nursery school—a facility not easily available to a Negro child.

The Families Committee argued that the Welfare Department’s initial refusal to intervene “can leave no doubt that the issue of ‘color, race or political belief’ is very much in evidence in the shocking discrimination and victimization of the Jackson family.” After substantial protest from the community, educators, social workers, family, and friends, Cooper Jackson and the Families Committee convinced the Welfare Department to stay the expulsion order indefinitely on January 30.

The connection between race, Kathy’s expulsion, the Moore murder, and the victimization of Smith Act families offers a window into an important moment in the history of the Black freedom movement. Historians have often perceived the early 1950s as a transitional period in Black activism, as the movement was restructuring itself around new political circumstances. The Popular Front’s decline opened the door for moderate and civil groups to make progress, but the leaders of the Popular Front Black

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62 “To the Editor of the Readers’ Column,” from Peggy Dennis and Sophie Gerson, James and Esther Jackson Papers, Box 13, Folder 9, Tamiment Library, New York University.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.


freedom movement did not simply stop acting because they faced FBI harassment and public scorn. It is important to examine their continued activism in the early Cold War years because the experiences of individuals like Esther Cooper Jackson offer insight into how the movement changed. The work of Black Popular Front activists in the early 1950s demonstrates how the economic components of the Black freedom movement became obscured: families needed to refocus their attention to immediate issues of political liberty and freedom from harassment. The intersection of personal and political life was never more obvious than in this era, when Esther Cooper Jackson’s activism centered on protecting her family from political persecution and racial discrimination. Understanding the ways in which the Jacksons’ family life changed within a shifting international political context between the Popular Front years and the Civil Rights years sheds light on the changing nature of the Black freedom movement. It offers a new look at how the seeming decline of one portion of the movement can really be understood as a harbinger of another.67

In addition to working with the Families Committee, Esther Cooper Jackson drew her dedication to her family together with her devotion to the Black freedom movement by working with the National Committee to Defend Negro Leadership (NCDNL). After

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President Harry Truman’s Secretary of Labor Lewis Schwellenback proposed outlawing the Communist Party, individuals and groups with some CPUSA ties formed the NCDNL in 1947. The group responded with a petition, urging that Harry Truman instead outlaw segregation and lynching. Over twelve Black newspapers ran the petition, which boasted the signature of Paul Robeson.\textsuperscript{68} When the indictments of the initial twelve Party leaders came about in 1948, the NCDNL emphasized the situations of Henry Winston and Benjamin Davis as particularly important assaults on the Black freedom movement. The organization characterized the Smith Act as “a menace confronting the Negro people.”\textsuperscript{69}

Though the organization’s primary goal was to defend persecuted Black Communists and fellow travelers, the NCDNL deemphasized party affiliation in favor of highlighting the larger struggle against racism. At an address in Detroit on April 30, 1953, NCDNL chairman, the Reverend Edward D. McGowan, told the National Fraternal Council of Churches at the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, U.S.A., Inc. that the attack on Black leadership “by the forces of reaction is an attempt to curb the mounting struggle of our people for dignity and full citizenship.” Making reference to the NAACP’s political position in the postwar years, he continued, “And so we must, by concerted action, foil the attempt of those forces that would discredit the real leaders of the Negro people and substitute those who dare speak only as their masters please.”\textsuperscript{70}

McGowan defended New York City Councilman and CP leader Benjamin Davis, but did not draw explicit attention to communism. Davis was elected to the City Council in 1943 by the system of proportional representation, and again in 1945, succeeding

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 200.
\textsuperscript{70} The Reverend Edward D. McGowan, Pastor, “In Defense of Negro Leadership,” Edward Strong Papers, Box 6, Folder 12, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Part of Davis’s appeal in the City was his position on racial issues. He also garnered support because of the United States’ wartime alliance with the Soviet Union, which, as the historian Gerald Horne argues, “allowed [his] message to be heard by less-prejudiced ears.”

Davis was ousted from his Council seat after his 1949 Smith Act conviction. McGowan argued that Davis’s voters in New York City “did not seem to question his politics” but rather knew “he was fighting for a better way of life for the Negro people.”

In fact, Horne notes that Davis had significant support among the clergy. On Davis’s quest for the Council seat, the Reverend Ben Richardson declared that the CPUSA, “approximates what Jesus stands for [more] than any other group.” Similarly, McGowan’s speech appealed to his religious audience, drawing not on common perceptions of godless communism, but on Christ’s sacrifice so his followers could live “according to the dictates of his own conscience rather than being told by a religious hierarchy what he must think, speak, believe.”

In all, the NCDNL leadership offered its audiences a way of understanding the repression of Black political leadership that appealed to a wide set of moral, religious, and political values while neither crediting nor dismissing the CPUSA.

When James Jackson disappeared, Esther Cooper Jackson got involved in the NCDNL. She remained uncompromising in her belief that her husband had a democratic right to his Communist political affiliation and that his absence was a severe blow to the

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Black freedom movement. Through the NCDNL, Cooper Jackson wrote a pamphlet titled, *This Is My Husband: Fighter for his People, Political Refugee*, which was first published in April 1953 and reissued in two additional printings later that year. In the 36-page pamphlet, she made her most persuasive case for the intersection of the struggles of Smith Act victim families and the Black freedom movement, all the while fusing her romantic love for her husband, her family’s welfare, and their political goals.

Cooper Jackson began *This Is My Husband* with a brief statement on her emotional suffering, but she situated her pain in the context of the connections between politics and romance, setting the tone for the pamphlet. She wrote, “It is a hard thing to confine oneself merely to making words about one’s beloved upon whose face one has not looked for what seems an eternity of time. I want so much to have now his warm comradeship; to hear again from his lips those winged words of exciting promise as he would give voice to his confident dreams of a free and bountiful new life for the world’s humblest peoples.”

She quickly detailed the FBI persecution her family experienced, again contrasting her situation to the bureau’s desultory handling of the Moore case.

The pamphlet highlighted the impact the Smith Act had on Black activists. Referring to the Supreme Court’s upholding of the Smith Act in *U.S. v. Dennis* (1951), Cooper Jackson quoted Black lawyers Earl B. Dickerson and Richard E. Westbrooks as arguing, “The inevitable effect of the Supreme Court decision on the Smith Act is to undermine, if not destroy, effective protest with regard to government practices and policies inimical to the welfare of Negroes.”

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75 Esther Cooper Jackson, *This Is My Husband: Fighter For His People, Political Refugee*, (New York: National Committee to Defend Negro Leadership, 1953), 5.
76 Ibid, 7.
intimidated Black activists to the point of silence by prosecuting high-level Black party leaders.

Along with Cooper Jackson, Dickerson and Westbrooks suggested that governmental attacks on communism and communist-influenced protest nourished the economic disenfranchisement of poor and working-class Blacks, who had been empowered through the unionization efforts of the Popular Front years. The indictment of James Jackson, then, was an outright assault against attempts to build “a nation in which the workers will toil to enrich themselves and not a small set of exploiting industrialists, a nation in which poor farming folk will own the land they till.”

*This Is My Husband* offered readers a portrait of James Jackson as a real person and not some Communist subversive blindly taking orders from Moscow. It highlighted the growth of his political perspective within the context of his Richmond upbringing. James Jackson was raised by highly educated parents, and he was afforded opportunities that many of his friends were denied, but his exposure to extreme poverty within his community led him to apply Marxist theory to practical change. Cooper Jackson mobilized her husband’s upbringing in his defense, arguing that the Richmond poor’s “soul-killing drudgery of their toil and sufferings, yet ever-hopeful spirit and striving for better things…inspired him to write, to speak, to join in and to lead struggles in their behalf.” Cooper Jackson invited readers to understand how a young boy’s exposure to the dramatically different opportunities for white and Black, poor and privileged people in a neighborhood would lead to the development of a Marxist political perspective. She wrote:

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77 Ibid, 7.
78 Ibid, 7-17.
79 Ibid, 6.
Whatever the power, the effect, or influence of my husband’s ideas upon the future conduct of the masses of people in this country in general and the South in particular, no sensible person can believe that it requires the dictates of some foreign Communist leader, living or dead, to have caused him to advocate a program of social reforms.\(^{80}\)

By situating her husband’s attraction to communism in the context of an impoverished, exploited Black community, Cooper Jackson asked her audience to see her husband as a rational, thoughtful man, not a cold political mouthpiece for a distant tyrant. James Jackson, she argued, was not an unfeeling Soviet dupe; rather, he was a compassionate man who sought to end the struggle and suffering of economically disadvantaged people, particularly those whose circumstances grew out of the South’s racist culture.

James Jackson was also a patriot, his wife argued. Cooper Jackson reprinted several of his World War II letters and speeches in the pamphlet. Her intention was to demonstrate his enthusiasm for the United States and his honorable service in the China-Burma-India Theater of war. In his letters, Jackson explored the implications of segregation for Black soldiers returning in the context of a victorious democracy. He expressed enthusiasm for realizing a double victory toward the end of the war, asserting:

> It seems to me, the SNYC and other Negro and progressive organizations in the South should build the organizations in such large numbers to take the offensive against the Ku Klux Klan and for the fulfillment of the Four Freedoms promised, which is so long overdue.\(^{81}\)

Cooper Jackson asked, “Are not these the words of a true leader of the people, loyal to the best that is in America?”\(^{82}\) While he was a Communist, his military service showed that he was also a true American, and was willing to fight for true democracy, Cooper Jackson argued.

\(^{80}\) Ibid., 33.
\(^{81}\) Ibid., 28.
\(^{82}\) Ibid., 28.
In using these letters, Cooper Jackson also demonstrated that her husband’s communism needed consideration in the context of a U.S.-Soviet alliance during the war. One letter highlighted Jackson’s perspective on the new atomic technology and offered one Communist’s view on widespread access to nuclear knowledge. Jackson wrote, “The application of the atomic bomb principle to industry may constitute a means for the revolutionary development of the formerly economically backward countries and for the speedy reconstruction of war devastated countries.” While the spread of atomic energy became a highly contentious issue during the Cold War, James Jackson’s perspective on the benefits of widespread use of the new technology offers insight into a communist perspective not bent on destroying the United States with a Soviet missile, but seeking to increase productivity and equality across the globe.

Many of the individuals persecuted in the early Cold War came under attack for their wartime politics. Cooper Jackson’s use of her husband’s letters showed that there was no black and white divide between communism and patriotism; that the political context in a given era shaped forms of popular protest and political perspective. Though many others who were persecuted in the Cold War had abandoned their wartime beliefs by the time they came under attack, James Jackson’s war letters illustrated that communism could be a part of American patriotism, particularly in the context of the U.S.-Soviet alliance during World War II. His adherence to his politics did not ebb and flow alongside U.S. diplomatic relations, but he believed that the framework of U.S. democracy afforded him a right to believe unpopular ideas. Esther Cooper Jackson illustrated that her husband’s views emerged from a combination of circumstances grounded in his Richmond racial upbringing, along with the Depression-era emergence of

83 Ibid.
anti-fascist politics. She also employed the letters as a way of illustrating how Popular Front activists envisioned the postwar world, and how starkly their vision contrasted with the reality they confronted in the early 1950s.

Cooper Jackson never accepted the charge that her husband had committed a crime by acting on his political convictions and learning from the ideas of foreign leaders. She nonetheless defended her husband’s right to seek ideas for change from thinkers in other countries, including Lenin and Stalin, citing a long tradition of relying on international influences to reformulate and perfect American democracy. Reports of Stalin’s tyranny in the Soviet Union were growing more frequent, and though many Communists held out hope that the reports were rumors and political propaganda, Cooper phrased her reference to Stalin carefully. She did not dismiss that Stalin’s ideas had influenced her husband, but she did not believe that the Soviet leader’s words were a precise reflection of her husband’s politics. She instead argued that Jackson had a right to read, interpret, and adapt the ideas of even the most unpopular political figure, and doing so did not make her husband the mirror image of a tyrant.

Cooper Jackson asked, “Should that search for answers to the most burning problems of every Negro and every worker stop at the continental borders of the United States? Concede this and our nation will soon become a benighted wasteland of ‘super patriotic’ bigots.”

Ibid., 34.

Cooper Jackson noted the exchange of revolutionary ideas between the United States and France, and argued that the spirit of change abroad inspired Thomas Jefferson to refine the democratic ideals in the early republic. Frederick Douglass drew strength, she argued, for the anti-slavery cause in the United States from Britain’s abolitionist movement.

Ibid., 34.
Cooper Jackson wondered what made her husband’s efforts to advance the cause of racial justice through the ideas of non-American thinkers so different from earlier heroes in American history. She argued that, “Today Congress would deny us the rich heritage of peoples of other lands... That these ideas have been adopted in other lands simply indicates that mankind, facing common problems, eventually arrives at common answers.”

In other words, politics in the United States had entered a distinct phase in which it stubbornly insulated itself from broad ideas from outside its physical and ideological borders, to the detriment of the Black freedom movement and efforts to create economic parity and security among workers.

Smith Act persecution was thoroughly intertwined with anti-worker and anti-segregation movements, and Cooper Jackson saw that connection at work in her husband’s situation. She argued that James Jackson and the other unavailables “acted in the great tradition of Frederick Douglass and the abolitionists who defied the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850…and chose to carry on their fight as ‘fugitives’ rather than obediently surrender their cause to the jailers of liberty.”

Cooper Jackson believed that the early Cold War was a critical moment like the Antebellum period in American history. She argued that Black leaders, “whether they are Communists, non-Communists, or anti-Communists…are being persecuted as ‘dangerous subversives,’ threatened, jailed, deported, lynched.”

She believed that her husband and his comrades’ freedom would advance the cause of democracy, equality, and liberty for the economically and racially oppressed in the United States.

85 Ibid, 34-35.
86 Ibid., 35.
87 Ibid., 32.
This Is My Husband closed with a declaration of pride in the efforts of the unavailables to promote and secure true democracy. Cooper Jackson asked friends and family not to offer her their pity for her plight, but to fight on behalf of the persecuted men and women in order to preserve true American ideals. She declared, “I have the wonderful satisfaction of knowing that my husband has labored to find a path that will lead my people and all those who are heavily burdened into an age of peace and security.”

The freedom of her family, the freedom of Black citizens, and the freedom of the nation relied on her husband’s ability to work in concert with an international movement of progressive thought and radical activism.

James Jackson’s disappearance and his wife’s effort to protect her daughters and defend her husband offer insight into this moment of transition in the Black freedom movement. Cold War experiences like the Jacksons’ helped to form the shift from Popular Front-driven civil rights organizing, with an emphasis on labor, unions, and economic equality, to the liberal civil rights movement that emphasized social and political rights. James and Esther Cooper Jackson’s political and personal experiences reflect the changing struggle for racial justice. Because the Jackson family felt the immediate, personal impact of anticommunist laws and the U.S.’s icy relationship with the Soviet Union, their activity in the Black freedom movement evolved accordingly. In spite of harassment and even though the dominant tactics and specific politics of the movement changed, the couple never disappeared from the Black freedom movement.

Esther Cooper Jackson regularly reminded her daughters that their father was trying to make the United States a better place for them to live, as Americans, as Black children, and as representatives to the world. As a mother, Cooper Jackson believed that

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88 Ibid., 36.
creating a better world for future generations meant being politically engaged on behalf of her family and on behalf of oppressed groups across the world. It was not enough to be a mother protecting her children from daily harm if they would become adults in an unjust world. The Smith Act Victims Families Committee and the NCDNL allowed Esther Cooper Jackson’s work toward changing the world and protecting her family to go hand-in-hand.
CHAPTER 5
“Your Leadership Still Guides Us”
James E. Jackson, Jr., the Communist Party, and the Modern Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s

At a meeting of the Communist Party, USA’s top leadership in 1957, James Jackson recorded detailed notes on the proceedings. The conversation centered on the Little Rock crisis in Arkansas, where nine Black children faced soldiers with bayonets and threatening white civilians as they tried to integrate the city’s Central High School. CPUSA General Secretary Eugene Dennis suggested that Little Rock foreshadowed the type of resistance Blacks would confront in their struggles, then stated that the Party should work to involve the packing and automobile industries to “initiate actions and solidarity rallies in Detroit and Chicago.” Interspersed with other comments on Little Rock and the emerging civil rights movement in the South were notes on unionization efforts across the country. Meeting participants discussed the theoretical connections between efforts to advance and unite the working class and the civil rights struggles in the South. But to Jackson the conversation seemed mired in his comrades’ ideas about what others should be thinking, not plans for concrete action that would directly benefit the children putting themselves on the dangerous front lines in the South.¹

Jackson was a devoted, life-long Communist interested in Marxist theory, the labor movement, and the ideological links between different struggles, but his position as a prominent Black leader in the South during the 1930s and 1940s afforded him a different perspective on Little Rock. While his comrades debated whether or how they could work to convince the labor movement that it should be involved in the southern civil rights struggles, Jackson had one picture fixed in his mind. To him, nothing spoke

¹ James Jackson’s notes on CPUSA meeting, James and Esther Cooper Jackson papers, Box 3 Folder 3, Tamiment Library, New York University.
more profoundly of the sacrifice and courage of the Little Rock Nine than the image of Elizabeth Eckford, alone in a mob of angry white Arkansans. In a side note to himself, he wrote, “Show them [the] picture of [Elizabeth] Eckford. Challenge them. Measure their effort by hers.”

He jotted down an idea for a book: “Dear Elizabeth – compilation of letters to newspapers from Americans on the Little Rock events.”

To James Jackson, getting the labor movement, the Communist Party, and the rest of the nation concerned about civil rights was as simple as showing them that “The measured trod of children’s small feet in the South have set a new pace and standard for the determined struggle to secure an equality of freedom for all citizens.”

The Party’s ideals were in the right place, but its frequently complicated analysis obscured how pressing the realities of the civil rights movement were. Jackson knew that there was little use for complex Marxist theory and Party paternalism when it came to on-the-ground crises and change in the South, and he devoted himself to helping the Party act with that in mind.

Cold War liberalism shaped the 1950s civil rights movement and the Communist Party, USA. The connection between the movement and the Party during these years was complicated by U.S. politics, foreign policy, and domestic culture. Both the CPUSA and the Black freedom movement worked to recreate themselves in the wake of a shifting U.S. relationship with the Soviet Union. The Popular Front’s demise in the postwar years led to the CPUSA’s decreased influence on the Black freedom movement, and the Party drifted back from the front lines of the struggle. Still, understanding the link that the Party worked to maintain offers insight into how the civil rights movement functioned, where its support came from, and how activists from across the political spectrum

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2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
adapted to the mainstream ideas of the time. As the Party’s Southern Regional Director, Jackson was the one of the CPUSA’s highest-ranking leaders with direct ties to the activists working on civil rights. His connections and insight not only helped the Party to develop a realistic position on the situation in the South during the 1950s, it also served to maintain the link between the CPUSA and the Black freedom movement during a time when the relationship between the two was tenuous.

The CPUSA faced its most difficult period in the 1950s. The Smith Act alone was enough to drive many members from the Party, and maintaining any degree of respect and influence while operating underground proved a challenge. The FBI’s psychological assault on Party members and their families forced the organization to divert its limited resources to the protection of wives and children, and away from many of the efforts for social change it had emphasized in the past. The domestic trials the organization confronted proved daunting and understandably difficult to surmount.

But these challenges were not limited to repression within U.S. borders. On February 25, 1956, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev delivered a lengthy address to the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party in which he revealed to a stunned audience the horrors of Joseph Stalin’s brutal regime. The CPUSA learned of the address in June, just six months after its underground operatives had reemerged. Faced with a series of complex questions about how to proceed, the CPUSA’s top leaders came into conflict with one another. The organization’s debate followed the same line it had in the immediate postwar years, over whether to distance itself from the Soviet Union, adapt its program to fit more securely into the United States’ political milieu, or move further to the left to challenge responses that equated Communism and Stalinism. In all of this
conflict, the Party became unable to function effectively. Party members and leaders who had weathered the difficult McCarthy years began to leave the organization. They left as a reaction to their deep disappointment in having been a part of a group that had touted a leader who, it turned out, was truly the tyrant he was rumored to be. Throughout this era, the CPUSA needed to adapt itself not only to the changing national political climate, but also to the prevailing worldview of the Soviet Union. Leaders clashed over these issues. Despite what it perceived as a moral victory when the McCarthy era came to a close on the national level, the CPUSA would never recover and never reach the influence it boasted in the Popular Front era, in part because echoes of McCarthyism persisted in the South.

The tumultuous aftermath of Khrushchev’s revelations resulted in a period of intense conflict for the remaining Party members. Despite renunciations of growing factionalism, the Party’s leadership remained divided among three prevailing points of view. John Gates argued that the CPUSA required substantial reform. He suggested deleting the phrase “Marxism-Leninism” from the Party’s constitution, acknowledging that the revelation of Stalin’s crimes had had a “liberating effect on world Communism,” and that the American public should be reassured that the CPUSA was indeed reforming itself to better fit its own national context. William Z. Foster, on the other hand, advocated strengthening the Party’s attachment to Marxism-Leninism and focusing on the “general world crisis of capitalism and the certainty of serious repercussions of it in the United States.” Eugene Dennis stood squarely between Gates and Foster, arguing for unity and for Marxist goals to be “grasped scientifically and applied creatively in accord

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with the concrete conditions of our country and the needs of the American working class.” 6 James Jackson positioned himself most closely with Dennis. His reaction to Khrushchev’s revelations was similar to his position on Communism’s applicability to civil rights: that Communists needed to consider contexts and employ theories in a flexible and pragmatic, not dogmatic, way.

The CPUSA lost much of its legitimacy in the 1950s amid the turmoil. 7 Its membership declined dramatically, and it suffered a crisis of credibility. But the Communist Party had certainly not disappeared from the public eye: it continued to hold conferences, work with Communist nations across the globe to try to rebuild itself, and it never ceased to draw criticism and inspire fear throughout the ongoing Cold War. In 1962, its remaining leaders again faced the threat of jail time when they declined to register as foreign agents under the McCarran Act. In 1968, Charlene Mitchell ran as the CPUSA’s candidate for President of the United States; she was the first Black woman to run for the office.

Over the course of the civil rights movement, critics and white supremacists regularly equated civil rights leaders, organizations, and participants with Communists. While such accusations manipulated peoples’ fears in the politically tense Cold War, they were grounded both in the CPUSA’s long tradition of supporting the Black freedom movement and the frequent criticism that Communists used and duped African Americans. Many older civil rights leaders did come out of the Popular Front, but most had vanquished their Communist ties. For instance, Bayard Rustin, who had been a

6 Fried, 397-403.
Communist in the 1930s but severed ties with the Party during World War II, had a positive rapport with Johnson White House officials, even as Martin Luther King, Jr.’s influence declined. But by the 1950s, open Communists were all but banished from mainstream civil rights organizations. Both Walter White and Roy Wilkins of the NAACP distanced themselves from activists associated with the Popular Front and openly questioned the motives and involvement of Communists at all levels of the civil rights movement. Martin Luther King, Jr. was quiet about his Communist friends, and while he accepted their support, he did succumb to pressure to dismiss them publicly.

In the traditional civil rights narrative, the lingering traces of McCarthyism shaped the way civil rights leaders devised their tactics. Some Communists and former Communists were involved in the Movement, but the Movement itself explicitly differed from Communist ideology. In exploring the Communist Party side of this equation, this chapter demonstrates how a struggling political organization sought to resurrect itself. It also explores how James Jackson saw civil rights as the Party’s biggest hope, as just the sort of cutting edge movement that could help to revitalize the CPUSA. The civil rights movement drew Jackson’s primary interest in racial justice to the forefront of Communist discourse. And while the Party was unsuccessful in rebuilding itself as part of the civil rights vanguard, the Party’s efforts to revise its program offer insight into the ways in which Communism and civil rights overlap and diverge.

Conflicts around the Khrushchev Report and McCarthyism stunted the CPUSA’s civil rights efforts. The Party often seemed out-of-step with the civil rights movement in the 1950s, but its problem did not stem from its intentions. The organization’s heart was in the right place: it stuck by its long advocacy of racial equality and justice and continued to offer expressions of solidarity to the organizations heading the movements in the South. James Jackson and other leaders worked to steer the Party’s interest in and influence on the civil rights movement in a concrete direction. They worked not only to make the Party relevant to the civil rights movement, but also to make the civil rights movement a key component in the Party’s success during a challenging period.

The difficulties the Party faced in its civil rights efforts were threefold. First, the organization lacked a concrete plan of action to help in the civil rights movement as it emerged. Beyond expressions of solidarity, the organization failed to take tangible steps toward getting involved in grassroots struggles. This problem directly resulted from the Party’s second serious set of dilemmas in the 1950s. Between McCarthyism, legal problems, and Khrushchev’s revelations about Stalin’s brutality, the CPUSA was paralyzed from the neck down. The leaders who weathered all of these difficulties and remained involved in the Party discussed the structure of their organization at immense length, but initiating any real action to get involved on the ground was nearly impossible. The Party’s paralysis was certainly a result of its own internal conflict, but it was also linked with its unfavorable public image. A significant reality for the Party in its civil rights efforts was that the open participation of Communists was often unwelcome among many of the top organizations involved in the Movement. Communism’s rapid fall from grace after the Popular Front years meant that its inclusion had the potential to taint the
activities of organizations like the NAACP, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Montgomery Improvement Association, and others.

Nonetheless, Black Popular Front activists operating in the 1950s did not necessarily dismiss wholesale the economic perspective Communists had brought to the movement simply because the Party went out of vogue. James Jackson’s analysis of the civil rights movement while he was underground and after his re-emergence and trial offers insight into the changing influence of the CPUSA on the Black freedom movement. Throughout the 1950s, Jackson worked to hone his expertise on race and labor relations in the South in order to allow for the most practical employment of Communism.

Because of his indictment in June 1951, Jackson’s work in the 1950s took place at the same time he was underground. From 1951 until late 1955, a significant part of the Communist Party operated within what it referred to as “the Second Cadre.” In addition to the indicted leaders who jumped bail, hundreds of communists and sympathizers across the United States quietly slipped from their daily lives into the Communist underground. As a result of McCarthyism’s long reach, most of these individuals still remain unknown, and their history is difficult to trace. They changed their names, raised their families, worked regular jobs, and were on hand in the event that the CPUSA needed them. Some of these people housed and protected the indicted leaders, and some hardly had any contact with the Party at all. Bunny Devine, whose family disappeared into the Second Cadre, led the quiet life of a middle-class housewife in Bridgeport, Connecticut. She gave birth to a daughter while she was underground and had to change her name and get a new social security number when the family re-emerged. She did not
know if or when her family would be called on to provide assistance or leadership. They never were.¹⁰

Party secrecy and the legal implications for individuals who aided the Second Cadre mean that there is limited historical record of the CPUSA’s covert operations. It is nearly impossible to trace James Jackson’s time underground and verify his precise positions and activities. As a Black fugitive from 1951-1955, Jackson was in a more precarious position than his white counterparts. Finding suitable housing for Jackson and Henry Winston, another African American, proved challenging for the Party. As Gil Green noted, “If they lived in Black ghetto communities, which were subject to far more rigorous police surveillance, accidental discovery was obviously a greater possibility…Yet if Winston or Jackson were to live with white families, they would be trapped indoors.”¹¹ Jackson spent some time in the Midwest, and he may have visited the South. Party member Charlene Mitchell once hosted Jackson in St. Louis, Missouri. He also spent some of his time on a farm in upstate New York, where locals knew him only as “Crazy Joe.” None of his family members had any contact with him, but he was able to get occasional updates on them through the CPUSA’s complex network of individuals linking the underground to those living out in the open. At one rally, a man approached Esther Cooper Jackson and handed her an envelope that contained her husband’s wedding band. While there is a dearth of sources on James Jackson’s time underground, it is still possible to understand the development of his intellectual perspective on the civil rights

¹⁰ Ethel Devine interview with Sara Rzeszutek, Brooklyn, NY; Esther Cooper Jackson interview with Sara Rzeszutek, Brooklyn, NY.
movement and the CPUSA. He continued to influence leftist thought on these matters by writing articles under the pseudonym Charles P. Mann (or, CP Man).12

The Second Cadre proved enormously frustrating to the FBI, even though the Bureau sought to deny the effectiveness of an underground Communist Party. In his 1958 work on Communism in the United States, Masters of Deceit, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover presented readers with a brief statement on the impact of the Second Cadre on the CPUSA. In his assessment, the CPUSA was almost completely disabled by the outcome of U.S. vs. Dennis (1951). By moving to underground operations, “the Party in protecting itself spent energy, time, and money that otherwise would have gone into agitation and propaganda.” The Party was “weakened and largely immobilized in its underground haunts.”13 Hoover’s analysis credits the Supreme Court’s ruling in one case with the dissolution of the CPUSA, but makes no mention of his own Bureau’s frenzied, expensive, and largely unsuccessful efforts to dismantle the Second Cadre. He was particularly embarrassed when the fugitives surrendered voluntarily. When Gil Green’s surrender was announced, Hoover scrawled, “This makes us look silly” over the text of the Bureau memo he received.14 In contrast to Hoover’s belief that the Party was rendered non-functional by the Smith Act trials, an assertion which contradicted Hoover’s own contention that the CPUSA remained a dangerous menace to the United States, CPUSA General Secretary Eugene Dennis suggested that the Second Cadre had scored some successes against Cold War authorities.15

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12 Esther Cooper Jackson interview with Sara Rzeszutke; James and Esther Cooper Jackson interview with Mary Helen Washington, in James and Esther Cooper Jackson Papers, Box 1, Folder 23; Green, Cold War Fugitive.
14 Green, Cold War Fugitive, back cover.
The Black freedom movement underwent profound changes during the McCarthy Era as Black Popular Front leaders shifted their focus to fit the political context of the time. Indictments of prominent Black Party leaders illustrated the dual perils of anticommunism and segregationism. While economic equality and interracial working class solidarity had been the rallying cry of the Popular Front, the nationwide attack on Communist activities and ideas meant that the main thrust of efforts to attain racial justice moved away from labor and unionization, and toward social, cultural, and political rights. Many historians cite the demise of the Popular Front as the key moment when the CPUSA’s influence in other social movements vanished. Robert Korstad argues that postwar red-baiting “[narrowed] the range of ideas and leaders on which the movement could draw…. The black challenge of the 1950s and 1960s came to be understood as a single-issue attack on Jim Crow and not as a more broad-based critique of racial capitalism.”

While it is important to acknowledge that movement away from labor marked a transition in the Black freedom movement that left some economic issues unaddressed, the goals of the mainstream civil rights movement did include long-term

economic progress. For the activists of the Popular Front years, staying active presented challenges that changed the shape of social movements in the United States. In some circles, activists’ emphasis began to center on protecting civil liberties and the families of the indicted leaders, while in others, Popular Front Black Freedom work gave way to liberal civil rights.

For the Jackson family, these two shifts were linked to one another. While Esther Cooper Jackson focused on illustrating how her husband’s disappearance and legal difficulty were direct assaults on her family and the Black freedom movement, James Jackson was able to continue quietly influencing Civil Rights discourse. His unavailability afforded him certain freedoms that would have been impossible had he not disappeared. Party leaders who went to prison were unable to write as extensively and unrestrainedly on political issues as those who went underground. As Peggy Dennis wrote of her husband’s imprisonment, “a special ruling was made in Washington that…none of Eugene Dennis’ [prison] letters could be published or quoted in public, and that he could not comment specifically on the Communist Party or ‘communism.’” Had he done so, he would have faced solitary confinement and the revocation of his correspondence privileges. And while Jackson was surely concerned with his family’s wellbeing, he also believed his decision to avoid prison was beneficial to his children’s futures, and he strove to make the most of his time out of the immediate spotlight.

The Party leaders who remained aboveground continued to rely on and express their appreciation for Jackson’s sacrifice. In a statement, they wrote, “We say to Comrade Jim Jackson, elected leader of the Party in the South and driven into hiding by

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17 See Peter Lau, *Democracy Rising.*
the bankrupt US bourgeoisie – wherever you may be – you should know we are making good use of the legacy you have left us…and thus your leadership still guides us.”19 The CPUSA’s statement suggests that the Second Cadre’s influence was not diminished by their unavailability. Party leaders who were in hiding had left intellectual support for the aboveground operatives. It is also not clear from the statement whether the Party referred to Political Affairs articles published under pseudonyms or articles published prior to the Second Cadre’s formation. The Party also sought to support Esther Cooper Jackson and their two daughters, and assured Jackson that “your family is now ours.”20

Jackson continued to function underground as a prominent Party expert on the issues Black Americans were confronting throughout the 1950s. Jackson covertly reported and analyzed the major developments in the Black freedom movement during the Party’s period of great tumult. Gil Green, who saw Jackson several times while the two were unavailable, recalled that Jackson continued to function as Southern Regional Director from 1951-1955. He wrote that Jackson’s “style of work was not all that different. Conditions in the South even prior to the witch hunt had never made possible the open functioning of the Party… Even in the best of times, CP organizers worked in the South at their peril.”21

The Party’s formal position on the Black freedom movement and its actions often differed from one another. Jackson worked to make the Party’s position more tangible and relevant to the rapidly growing movement in the South. In 1959, Jackson was a key contributor in revising the CPUSA’s position on “the Negro question,” which was

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19 CPUSA Report, James and Esther Cooper Jackson Papers, Box 3, Folder 14, p 41.
20 Ibid.
21 Green, 118.
formally revisited for the first time since the 1928 advent of “Black Belt thesis.”

The Black Belt thesis had become the source many of the Party’s critics used to suggest that Moscow was merely using American Blacks to promote Soviet Communism in the United States. Although the official Party line prioritized class issues, arguing that class encompassed race, and while many Party leaders stuck by this formulation, American Communists were unequivocal in their support of the notion of racial equality.

James Jackson’s effort to reform Party policy on civil rights was an attempt to correct the notion that the Party cared only to use African Americans toward their own ends, as well as an expression of unwavering solidarity with the integration efforts in the Deep South.

While Jackson was in hiding, he worked on evaluating the Party line and the efforts Black Americans were making in the South in order to allow the CPUSA to uphold its reputation as front-line fighters for racial equality. Jackson’s key points in all of his writing emphasized the notion of the civil rights movement as a struggle that was distinct from, but required the support of, the CPUSA. As a Party centrist, he believed that the CPUSA would benefit from adapting itself to changing U.S. political discourse and offering full support to civil rights organizations. His earlier work with the Southern Negro Youth Congress allowed him to see the emerging civil rights movement as a mass struggle that the Party could assist, but should not co-opt. Though he was a part of the upper levels of Party leadership, Jackson never took a dogmatic position on civil rights. He believed that the oppression in the South required a people’s movement, and that the

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movement should reflect the needs, desires, and ideas of Black southerners, not Party hard-liners.

James Jackson’s time underground provided him with the opportunity to develop his knowledge of the issues in the South, hone his position, and ultimately shape Party policy on the civil rights movement. Some of his writings during these years emphasized how Black efforts to obtain civil, social, and political rights in the South fit squarely within the Party’s class analysis. Other works focused exclusively on how the Party should adapt its position on the Negro Question to fit the times. Jackson also produced a number of short pieces in which he sought to illustrate how his own legal troubles reflected the changing Black freedom movement. These describe his devotion to Communism as a manifestation of his core commitment to the struggles of politically, socially, and economically disenfranchised African Americans. They invoke his personal history and his dedication to his family as crucial factors in his political life. Once he re-emerged, his research while in the Second Cadre was crucial to his articulation of the 1959 revision of the Party’s position on the Negro Question.

In 1952, Jackson began writing a piece under the pseudonym Charles P. Mann titled, “Universal Suffrage… The Gauge of the Maturity of the Working Class.” Shortly before Jackson wrote the piece, a few members of the second cadre met in Chicago and organized a plan to continue activity covertly. They submitted proposals to the CPUSA’s National Board, which agreed to allow the unavailables to write articles for *Political Affairs* using pseudonyms. Because the security and protection of the Second Cadre were paramount for its continued ability to fulfill its purpose, it is likely that the pseudonyms
under which the unavailables wrote were unknown to the aboveground leadership. In addition to allowing the unavailables to remain active, writing under pseudonyms gave them anonymity and afforded them the opportunity to critique Party practices. For men who had given up their family lives and devoted themselves to fighting what they saw as United States fascism, it was increasingly important that they were able to express their views on Party policies and shape the organization to best serve their interpretation of the nation’s needs. Jackson’s drafting of “Universal Suffrage” reflects the development of a burgeoning civil rights movement over the 1950s, and illustrates how Jackson’s view on political rights for Black Americans related to the CPUSA’s interests.

The first version of “Universal Suffrage,” drafted in August, emphasizes the impact of mass voter disenfranchisement on the upcoming 1952 election. Jackson argued that Adlai Stevenson and Dwight D. Eisenhower’s campaign measures to increase the electorate and register new voters were insincere. Voter registration efforts did not mitigate the impact of the candidates’ lack of attention to the South’s poll tax system. Anti-poll tax legislation had bounced around the House of Representatives and Senate to no avail in the mid-twentieth century. Southerners, ranging from liberal politicians to Popular Front organizers and civil rights organizations had lobbied to end the tax, which made voting cost-prohibitive for poor and working class Blacks and whites. Jackson’s

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24 Gil Green, *Cold War Fugitive*, Esther Cooper Jackson interview with Sara Rzeszutek.
essay connected Communists’ concerns for the working class and the rights of Black southerners. He wrote:

Spokesmen in both the Stevenson and Eisenhower entourage have been exhorting the people about their ‘laziness and indifference’ to the necessity of registering to vote…Yet, not one word has passed from their lips in support of enabling measures to enforce the constitutionally proclaimed but historically denied right of those men and women of voting age among the ten million disenfranchised Negroes in the South.27

In a footnote, he elaborated on the extent of voter disenfranchisement, stating that 95 percent of potential Black voters in the South were disenfranchised, and because of the policies enforcing this system, 65 percent of potential white voters were also voteless. Yet Jackson avoided arguing that the mass disenfranchisement of poor and working class whites and Blacks across the South was exclusively a class issue. Instead, he pinpointed racism as the source of the problem, suggesting that disenfranchised white voters were mere collateral damage from Dixiecrat efforts to limit the political agency of Black southerners.

The essay detailed the undemocratic nature of the South’s electoral process. Jackson argued that the absence of Black voters resulted in unrepresentative government. He pointed out that in Mississippi’s first district, of all the 122,826 potential voters, Representative John Rankin, a notorious racist, “was elected to Congress in 1950 by only 8,994 votes, his Republican opponent receiving a mere 730.” Voter turnout was just 8 percent of the potential electorate. Rankin’s election was particularly egregious in the eyes of African Americans and American Communists because his politics defined the

27 “Universal Suffrage.”
link between anticommunism and hard-line segregationism. He was also a proud anti-
Semite and he opposed HUAC investigations of the Ku Klux Klan.  

Because he was elected by such a tiny portion of the individuals of voting age in his district, Jackson argued that there was no way he could truly represent the public interest. The example of Rankin’s election, alongside other Southern elections, led Jackson to compare the United States to South Africa, which had “disfranchised so many people in so many ‘free elections’, for so long a time and still [has] the gall to proclaim itself a democracy!” Jackson compared Rankin’s election to Adam Clayton Powell’s in New York City and William C. Dawson’s in Chicago in 1950. Pointing out that Powell won 35,233 votes of 55,491 cast and Dawson won 69,506 of 112,585, Jackson contrasted the lack of voter participation in the South with the “stubborn and oft times heroic struggle of the Southern Negroes for possession of that elemental badge of citizenship—the right to vote.” Jackson argued that poll taxes, along with educational and moral requirements, were the primary cause for the disproportionately low numbers of voters in the South. In a state like Alabama, where the poll tax was cumulative, a “forty-five year old person seeking to cast his or her first vote must pay $36.00 for the privilege...[making] voting a prohibitive luxury for the millions of working people and farmers whose incomes are notoriously the lowest in the country.” By highlighting the racial politics of this system’s primary beneficiaries, Jackson illustrated that class

30 “Universal suffrage.”
31 Ibid., 4.
exploitation was a product of racism in the South’s electoral system, and not the other way around, as orthodox communist doctrine argued.

In addition to discriminatory voter registration requirements, Jackson noted that the Ku Klux Klan offered the region its most effective method for disenfranchising Black voters. He argued that Harry and Harriette Moore’s assassinations in 1951, along with the shooting of Maceo Snipes in Georgia in 1946 were prime examples of the Klan’s effective “organized terror against would-be Negro voters.”

Jackson called on Communists to assist in the Black struggle for the ballot in any way possible, arguing that:

> Every really popular movement of the people for democratic reforms – no matter how elementary the demands – is pregnant with the seeds of enormous possibilities for favorably altering the social forces in the direction of sweeping progressive advancements for the working class, the Negro masses and all democratic classes of people.

In his writings on suffrage for southern Blacks, Jackson focused on how Black efforts for political rights and against racial violence were relevant to the activism of other progressives, not how Communism or other leftist movements were important in the lives of Black southerners. This distinction offers insight into how Jackson employed Communism in his own political life. For him, it was a relevant and vital means to achieving social and economic justice for all. But he saw clearly that Black southerners were the primary agents of change in their own lives, and were capable of making informed political decisions. By encouraging Communists and other progressives to lend their support to and act with Black southerners, Jackson was attempting to move activist

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32 Ibid, 5., Maceo Snipes, a World War II veteran, was the first black person to vote in Taylor County, Georgia in 1946. A day after he exercised his right to the franchise, he was shot in the back by four white men. Snipes died two days later, and to this day the murder remains unsolved. [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/13/AR2007021300121.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/13/AR2007021300121.html).

33 "Universal Suffrage, 10"
discourse away from the notion that Communists were out to take advantage of African Americans. Instead, Jackson argued, “Communists...above all others must appreciate and energetically fight for such a partial democratic reform as this: first of all because it is right, and just, and would represent some measure of dignity to an outrageously oppressed people.”34 In other words, Communists should join with and follow other social movements, including the Black freedom movement.

Jackson’s disappearance into the Communist underground represented one way in which Cold War tensions shaped the Black freedom movement. Jackson’s political affiliation drove him, along with his approach to racial justice movements, further from the mainstream. Meanwhile, Black freedom movement tactics shifted, in part as a response to the Cold War. In nearly every major civil rights crisis that emerged in the mid- and late-1950s, the image of democracy that the U.S. projected abroad was compromised. The U.S. could hardly promote American ideals abroad when it failed to implement them at home. As the historian Mary Dudziak argues, “domestic racism and civil rights protest led to international criticism of the U.S. government. International criticism led the federal government to respond, through placating foreign critics by reframing the narrative of race in America, and through promoting some level of social change.” Social change in the beginning of the Cold War was influenced by the “need for reform in order to make credible the government’s argument about race and democracy.”35 Cold War civil rights reforms in the United States emerged from embarrassment and image consciousness, rather than a purist vision of social justice. The

34 Ibid.
35 Dudziak, Cold War Civil Rights, 13-14.
U.S. could not continue to promote itself as a democratic nation if the Soviet Union could criticize and mock its racial caste system.

Black activists in the South saw an opportunity for mass action as McCarthyism began to fade and as the international political climate demanded that the U.S. embody the democracy it promoted. Over the course of the mid-1950s, African Americans would see the beginnings of school integration in the South, along with the rise of major organizations and leaders who would fully reshape racial politics in the United States. In December 1955, Rosa Parks agreed to allow the Montgomery, Alabama NAACP to use her arrest for refusing to comply with segregation laws on a city bus to kick-start a boycott and fight transportation segregation. The Montgomery Improvement Association and Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) emerged from the Montgomery Bus Boycott and found in the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. a charismatic leader. Black activists, under King, proved through nonviolent tactics that “the philosophy of Thoreau and Gandhi can triumph.” In this context, Jackson’s efforts to keep civil rights discourse at the forefront of the Party program while he hid is one component of the impact that Cold War politics had on the Black freedom movement.

Jackson continued to develop his understanding of the problems Black southerners confronted throughout his time underground. In March of 1955, writing as Charles P. Mann and Frederick C. Hastings, Jackson and Henry Winston published an article in *Political Affairs* called “For a Mass Policy in Negro Freedom’s Cause.” In their essay, Jackson and Winston criticized the Party for being out of step with the growing civil rights movement and called on the CPUSA to revise its approach to the Black

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freedom movement. They offered an extensive policy proposal for bridging the divide between civil rights and the Party. As Black Communists with Southern roots who were indicted, in hiding, and facing prison, the two were particularly interested in how the Party positioned itself in relation to a movement in which they were each personally invested.

Jackson and Winston contested Communist claims that the Black freedom movement required the creation of “Left centers,” and that the Party’s failure led the “Negro masses to be taken over by the bourgeois reformist leaders.”38 Though it may have frustrated Roy Wilkins, the NAACP’s anticommmunist Executive Secretary, Jackson and Winston praised the NAACP’s efforts for school desegregation and applauded the steps Black Americans took to mobilize the organization. They argued, “The N.A.A.C.P. is viewed by the Negro people as their own organized mass weapon which has won important battles for them in recent years.” Nonetheless, the pair criticized the NAACP’s leadership, calling them “reformist supporters of the white ruling class” who only followed the tide of protest, rather than initiating it, in order to “remain the leaders of the Negro people.” If the NAACP had not followed the will of the people toward increased militancy, Jackson and Winston suggested, “the initiative and leadership exercised by the Communists and the Left would have resulted in the whole Negro liberation movement being organized and led by the working-class ideology and leadership of our Party.”39 Instead, they argued that the masses of poor, disenfranchised, and segregated Blacks in the South were seeking practical leadership, and in spite of the NAACP’s moderate reputation, the organization had become a vehicle for radical change.

39 Mann and Hastings, 11.
“For a Mass Policy in Negro Freedom’s Cause” was published shortly after Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka Kansas (1954). Jackson and Winston lamented the slow steps toward true desegregation in public schools and argued that Communists should be involved in helping to implement the ruling on the ground. Taking an unnamed fellow Communist to task for suggesting that “Left Centers” would provide a solution to the problems facing Black southerners, Jackson and Winston argued that “The historic and heroic fight to implement the Supreme Court decision on outlawing school segregation and the fight to extend the right to vote and equal representation are such movements and struggles already involving millions.” The Party did not need to ignite a struggle if one already existed, and such a suggestion distracted Communists from becoming fully involved in a momentous movement. The primary goal, according to Jackson and Winston, should have been to get involved with the organizations already working toward complete school desegregation, instead of pondering how to win the Black masses over to a Communist-run organization working toward the same ends.

“For a Mass Policy in Negro Freedom’s Cause” called on Communists to correct their flawed approach to the Black freedom movement by reinvigorating Popular Front-style involvement. Jackson and Winston agreed that looking only to the 1930s, where Communists exercised considerable influence in the Black freedom movement and were a more popular organization, was wrong-headed and ignored too much of the current context. But they acknowledged that a similar approach to the current movement could effectively win the hearts and minds of the Black southern masses and contribute to the mounting victories in civil rights struggles. They concluded, “If our Party enters with both feet into the mass movement of the Negro people without losing its own identity and

40 Ibid.
more advanced ideological and political program, then it can begin to regain rapidly its lost influence and leave its decisive mark on the future of the movement."\textsuperscript{41}

Further, the pair implied, the Party’s isolation from the civil rights movement was in part a product of the fact that it viewed “bourgeois reformist” organizations like the NAACP as the force to be conquered. Though Jackson and Winston believed that the true enemy of racial justice was obvious, they made a point of reminding their audience that resistance to change in the South was powerful. Highlighting the surge of White Citizens Councils, States Rights Associations, the “National Association for the Advancement of White People,” the “National Association to Defend the Majority of White People,” and the “Defenders of State Sovereignty and Liberty,” Jackson and Winston argued that the “reign of terror against the Negro people” required immediate attention. They noted that, even though the CPUSA characterized the NAACP as “reformists” who pandered to the white ruling class, to white supremacist organizations, there was no distinction between Communists and moderate Black activists who advocated for desegregation.

Jackson and Winston illustrated to the Party that the White Citizens Councils in Mississippi “[applied] economic pressures to ‘trouble-makers’ [who advocated] compliance with the Supreme Court decision.”\textsuperscript{42} White supremacist organizations used foreclosure, credit denial, and other threatening and violent tactics to accomplish their goals, and any Black Mississippian who had made it out of poverty risked severe danger if they were not quiet about their politics. Jackson and Winston applauded NAACP efforts to provide financial support to business owners, homeowners, farmers, and

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 29
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 17-18.
workers who risked their livelihoods to defend civil rights. They argued that the “unity displayed in Mississippi by all classes of Negro life cannot but inspire the entire democratic camp.”

Jackson and Winston also noted that the NAACP and Black leaders in Mississippi were “developing a new form of struggle, ‘the economic boycott’ as their answer to the economic terror of the white bankers, merchants, and plantation owners.”

The situation in Mississippi deteriorated in 1955 in response to Brown. According to NAACP leader Amzie Moore, white supremacists killed seven Blacks that year. Among them, the Reverend George Lee and Gus Courts, organizers of the Belzoni, Mississippi NAACP were murdered after they filed suit against a local sheriff who refused to accept poll taxes from potential African American voters. In August, Mississippi’s pattern of racial violence gained national attention with the murder of fourteen-year-old Chicago boy Emmett Louis Till. Till, visiting an uncle in Money, Mississippi over the summer, was unfamiliar with the particularities of Jim Crow. Though he was aware of racial separation, he was not versed in the gendered rules of segregation. Till was kidnapped, shot, and weighted down in the Tallahatchie River after a white woman in a convenience store reported that he had spoken to her inappropriately. His death, along with the trial of his killers, catalyzed the start of the civil rights movement across the South, including the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Although Jackson and Winston reemerged and began to confront their own legal problems at the precise moment the Montgomery Bus Boycott began, their praise for the Mississippi

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43 Ibid, 18
44 Ibid.
46 Ibid., 39-40. Till’s murderers were acquitted, and shortly thereafter confessed to the murder in a magazine interview.
leaders discussing boycott plans indicated that they would have expressed support.

Jackson and Winston closed the portion of their article on school desegregation by urging the Party to “end our isolation and weaknesses which flow from the past underestimation of this question.”

Ending Communist isolation from the growing civil rights movement was the dominant theme in Jackson and Winston’s article. The article expressed general agreement with the Party’s goals, but offered extensive criticism of the CPUSA’s ideas for how best to become involved. The pair vehemently disagreed with a fellow comrade who “mechanically shouts ‘working-class hegemony’ and politically places his main emphasis not on the struggle to unite the Negro people as a people but on sharpening up the differences within its ranks.” Instead of further fragmenting the American Left, Jackson and Winston asserted, Communists needed to bring their radical ideas quietly to the front lines of the mounting struggles across the South. Unity among the masses would prevail over a splintered movement with similar goals but different means.

Winston and Jackson’s article did not simply articulate a clear stance on the CPUSA’s involvement in the Black freedom movement. For the pair and for the Second Cadre, publishing articles under pseudonyms in Political Affairs allowed Communist discourse to continue in a period of censorship, repression, and fear. Though a great deal of vociferous debate occurred regularly on the pages of Political Affairs, Jackson and Winston had greater liberty to critique their comrades and the Party writing as Mann and Hastings than they might writing under their own names. Particularly in the arena of civil rights, Jackson’s writings from the Second Cadre allowed him to continue to be involved

47 Mann and Hastings, 19.
48 Ibid., 21
in Party affairs and to voice his own views. Jackson’s writings as Charles P. Mann served a dual function for the Party, as well. His pieces allowed for the outward appearance of solidarity from within Party ranks, for the unavailables seemed completely behind the Party line. But, because Jackson’s anonymity allowed him to express his opinions openly, Political Affairs contradicted the common assumption that Communists were of one mind, following a single policy coming from Moscow.

After nearly five years in hiding, James Jackson emerged from the Second Cadre on Friday, December 2, 1955, turning himself in at the Federal Courthouse building in New York City. On learning of his surrender, United States Attorney Paul W. Williams told the New York Times that Jackson was “one of the most dangerous Communist conspirators in the United States.” The Times article also noted that Jackson was “the Party’s top organizer in the South” and that his surrender was a critical step in ensuring the security of the United States. The attention to Jackson’s supposed threat to the United States along with his role in the South illustrated the extent to which the Communist Party’s potential position in the emerging civil rights movement was truly a national issue. Whereas Black religious leaders, local business owners, domestics, and moderates in the South could ask for their rights and ruffle only the feathers of whites most resistant to change, the specter of a Communist asking for the South to sacrifice its traditions made the whole nation nervous.

Jackson was the second unavailable to surrender in one week’s time. Fred Fine had surrendered that Wednesday, and William Norman Marron was expected to emerge sometime in the following week. Both the federal government and the CPUSA saw the

50 Ibid.
surrenders as victories and both interpreted their victories as triumphs for the ideals and goals of the United States. The substance of those ideals and goals depended on the angle of interpretation, however. The government claimed success because the surrenders proved that a conspiracy existed, the threat was real, and the danger had been quelled. On the other hand, William Z. Foster, the Party’s National Chairman, issued a statement that argued, “Communists fight for the democratic rights of all and seek to advance their socialist ideals openly in the American marketplace of opinion.” He asserted that the surrenders of Fine and Jackson were “an expression of confidence in the rising democratic strength of the American people.”

In other words, Soviet Union’s new leadership, the Senate’s censuring of McCarthy, and a more stable international political climate made the likelihood of a fair trial better in 1955 than it had been in 1951.

Still, the trial would not be an easy fight. Jackson, like his wife, saw his legal situation as a reflection of the struggles Black Americans consistently faced when they became politically active. On his surrender, Jackson issued a statement at the courthouse in which he contrasted the attention his political views received with the injustices millions of Blacks across the South confronted daily:

While the Mississippi lyncherman-suspicers of the Negro child Till go unpunished and “Cousins” of white supremacy racists (by overt criminal acts of shooting, floggings, and burnings) terrorize Negroes who seek to exercise their elementary rights of citizenship encounter no opposition from the federal law enforcement authorities, innocent men and women are indicted, tried and imprisoned like common criminals because of ideas they are alleged to harbor in their minds!

Having furthered his complex analysis of the changes happening within the South during his time underground, Jackson consistently contextualized his defense in the burgeoning Black freedom movement. As his wife contrasted the FBI’s uneven investigations of her family and violent acts in the South, Jackson compared Smith Act proponents to the white supremacists in the South who adamantly resisted change.

Jackson had the strong representation of Charles T. Duncan, a Harvard-educated Black civil rights attorney. Duncan, along with his associate council, Frank Reeves, actively participated in the NAACP’s efforts in *Brown vs. Board of Education*. By selecting attorneys who were a part of the civil rights movement and who represented a more moderate strain of political thought than Jackson, he set himself apart from the other defendants. His choice of representation reflected his view that his trial was not just a fight against political repression. It was also inextricably linked with the Black freedom movement. As a Black Communist with a long history in the struggle for racial justice, Jackson attempted to illustrate that he was an independent-minded participant in a larger movement, not just a hard-line follower of Soviet doctrine.

His trial included a moving testimony from his elderly father and a letter of support from Ralph Bunche, his former supervisor from his time working with the Myrdal study. W.E.B. Du Bois also testified, called by the defense as a character witness. The prosecution asked Du Bois if there was “any organization or conference that I have referred to so far that in your opinion had no Communist participation.” He replied, “That’s too general a question. I don’t know. Besides, I don’t see how anyone can determine whether or not there is Communist participation or not. I can’t look out in

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53 “Smith Act Trial of 7 Starts Here Monday,” 4/6/56, James and Esther Cooper Jackson Papers, Box 13 Folder 3.
this audience and say whether there is or not. I don’t recognize Communists by their faces or their dress.” The Court questioned whether Du Bois meant that he could not identify Communists in the courtroom, dismissed the nuance of his statement, and proceeded to interrogate the 88-year old activist and scholar’s statement, suggesting that he was no more than a confused old man. Du Bois was palpably irritated at prosecution attempts to dilute his complex analysis of socialism and force him to identify the Communists in the room. Du Bois stuck to the distinction he had made between having knowledge of an individual’s political reputation and his own firsthand knowledge of an individual’s actual politics, to the frustration of the prosecution and the court.  

Prosecutors worked to be very specific about the charges against Jackson and his co-defendants. Although there was ample opportunity to incite fear in the jurors with just the idea that a true threat of violence existed, they distinguished the charges from acts of violence. Prosecutors argued that conspiracy was threat enough, stating, “The intent of a defendant to knowingly and willfully participate need not be proved by direct evidence but, on the contrary, may and indeed generally must be inferred from all of the facts and circumstances.” The prosecution suggested that intent could be inferred from the mere fact that the defendants had an awareness of the consequences of their conspiracy.  

The defense sought to establish that Communism did not inherently advocate or imply that violence was necessary, challenging the notion that Communists were automatically un-

54 Testimony by James E. Jackson, Sr., and W.E.B. Du Bois, James and Esther Cooper Jackson papers, Tamiment Library, New York University, Box 13 Folder 8.
55 “United States Court of Appeals For the Second Circuit To be argued by Morton S. Robson,” James and Esther Cooper Jackson Papers, Box 13 Folder 1.
American. After eleven hours of deliberation, a jury of eight men and four women found Jackson and his comrades guilty.\textsuperscript{56}

At the sentencing stage, Jackson made another attempt to prove himself a compassionate, thoughtful activist whose politics would benefit the masses. He grounded his statement to the court in his upbringing and the development of his political consciousness alongside the injustices of the Jim Crow South, drawing on the burgeoning civil rights movement rather than focusing solely on Communist dogma. Jackson argued, “The freedom of choice in associates, the freedom of choice of membership in an association, are freedoms particularly dear to the Negro people. Involved is the essence of the right to pursue and secure relationships with other Americans in order to further our advance toward genuine equality and to realize our stature as free American citizens.”\textsuperscript{57}

Although most Black Americans, Jackson asserted, “hold no brief for the Communist Party’s program of socialism,” the history of slavery, segregation, lynching, and disenfranchisement would lead them to believe in Jackson’s “right to pursue the struggle for their rights through this political party.” According to Jackson, Black Americans would “want the doors of political alternative left open to facilitate a greater responsiveness to their needs and demands on the part of the Democratic or Republican Party of their current choice.”\textsuperscript{58} Jackson also characterized his own Communism as “a social science…and not…holy scripture.”\textsuperscript{59} Jackson appealed to potential judicial

\textsuperscript{56} \textit{Daily News}, Aug 1 1956, James and Esther Cooper Jackson papers, Tamiment Library, New York University, Box 13, Folder 3.
\textsuperscript{57} James E. Jackson, Jr., Statement before sentencing, James and Esther Cooper Jackson papers, Tamiment Library, New York University, Box 13 Folder 11.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
appreciation for the emerging civil rights struggle in the nation, hoping that he could help
the court make sense of Communism’s appeal. Also, his aging mother made an
emotional plea for clemency on her son’s behalf.

Jackson received a two-year sentence, and he was released on $20,000 bail to
prepare for his appeal. While the appeals process was beginning for Jackson and his co-
defendants, the Supreme Court determined in *Yates v. United States* (1957) that under the
Smith Act, “advocacy, to be criminal, must be of some future action, rather than of the
desirability of believing something,” thereby severely limiting the scope of the *Dennis*
opinion.\(^\text{60}\) The Yates decision affected nearly ninety Communists who were either
convicted or awaiting prosecution.\(^\text{61}\) Jackson’s case was among the convictions that were
reversed.

When the ordeal of Jackson’s trial, sentencing, and appeal was over, he focused
on two priorities: reconnecting with his family and reconstructing the Communist Party
as a practical, useful organization focused on helping progressive struggles across the
nation. After a cross-country driving trip with his wife and daughters, which included a
visit to artist Elizabeth Catlett in Mexico City, Jackson dove headfirst into insisting that
the CPUSA develop a pragmatic approach to the civil rights movement. He also hoped
that mainstream civil rights organizations would open themselves more to Communists,
their ideas, and their comradeship. Jackson had long been critical of the NAACP’s
opposition to Communism, and argued in a letter to Roy Wilkins that suggestions that the
CPUSA “had some diabolical interest…and some Machiavellian intrigue afoot to
‘infiltrate, subvert, and take over’” were pure nonsense. Jackson attempted to explain


\(^{61}\) Ibid.
that, “all such rumors are the inspired products of the fevered brains of the foes of Negro-white unity for civil rights and of the NAACP.” Communists wanted to participate in and support NAACP activities “in conformity with the practices, procedures, and specific objectives prescribed by their respective host.” But most Communists and moderate Black activists did not agree with Jackson on the current compatibility of the NAACP and the CPUSA.

Still, Jackson believed that striving for some form of reciprocal relationship could only help to salvage the CPUSA from the difficulties of the 1950s and broaden the NAACP’s appeal to encompass a wider political spectrum. The first step, for Jackson, was to assure the NAACP that Communists, while vocal, were not out to take over the organization. As he argued with Henry Winston in “For a Mass Policy,” Jackson also believed that the Communist Party needed to move beyond the limitations of its dogmatic approach to the Black freedom movement, accept that civil rights workers had forged a mass movement without them, and seek to offer assistance and solidarity before criticism. The school integration crisis in Little Rock, Arkansas offered Jackson an opportunity to lead the CPUSA in the direction he believed was most appropriate.

On September 9, 1957, after Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus called in the National Guard to prevent nine Black children from entering Central High School, the Communist Party issued a statement on the Little Rock events based on a report by James Jackson. The statement reflected Jackson’s position on the CPUSA’s involvement in the arena of civil rights. Though the statement was uncompromisingly militant and forceful,

\[\text{Letter from James Jackson to Roy Wilkins, Feb 24 1956, James and Esther Cooper Jackson Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University. Box 6 Folder 30.}\]
nearly all Communist rhetoric was noticeably absent. The statement urged that Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus’s actions merited indictment because he was a:

   criminal at large not alone because he has ordered over two hundred armed soldiery to menace young Negro children with loaded guns, tear gas and fixed bayonets, but, in doing so he has organized a military force committed to violence against a branch (the judiciary) of the federal authority of the United States Government.63

In the statement, the Party acknowledged the supremacy of the U.S. constitution and legitimized U.S. politics in the face of state-level defiance. In fact, the CPUSA’s statement was not substantively different from the NAACP’s position on the crisis. The two organizations differed in style on the issue, but little else.

   The main difference between the CPUSA’s position and the NAACP’s position was one of public persona. While the CPUSA had little to lose by issuing a militant statement, the NAACP attempted to be more diplomatic in public. It was, after all, responsible for the legal proceedings in the situation and was ultimately on the side of the federal government. The organization was also much closer to the thick of the crisis than the CPUSA and needed to be cautious in order to protect the safety of the children. In a letter to Adam Clayton Powell, Roy Wilkins could not comment “in language suitable either for the stationary of the N.A.A.C.P. or the ears of a Baptist clergyman” on his reaction to the Little Rock situation. He wrote, “I have great difficulty in speaking calmly about the role of President Eisenhower in this whole mess. He has been absolutely and thoroughly disappointing and disillusioning from beginning to end…perhaps he did not want to get into a fight on behalf of the Negro but he didn’t do

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63 Statement of the CPUSA on the Events in Little Rock, 9 Sept 1957, Jackson papers, Box 3 Folder 13.
anything when the authority of his own Federal Government was challenged."\textsuperscript{64} Wilkins asserted in his letter that Eisenhower had “abdicated leadership in a great moral crisis.”\textsuperscript{65}

The Party agreed, calling the White House’s behavior, “double talk, procrastination, evasion, and buck-passing” as children confronted the aggression of soldiers and “wild-eyed racist mobsters.”\textsuperscript{66}

The Party also slipped out of character and meandered into religious territory. It compared Eisenhower to Pontius Pilate, condemning his “inaction while high officials invoke mobs to menace the lives and liberties of Negro school children.”\textsuperscript{67} Wilkins had also mocked Faubus, who, on learning that the National Guard would be removed from Central High School, declared, “Now begins the crucifixion.” Wilkins wrote, “What baloney, I thought to myself. The governor was not Jesus. Defying the Supreme Court was no ministry.”\textsuperscript{68} The Party’s statement centered first on expressing its outrage at the crisis, but the language it used evoked an image of the CPUSA as an organization that could appreciate and support movements without necessarily bringing in its own agenda. Class struggle was wholly absent, and trade unions were only mentioned once alongside churches, schools, and civic organizations as an example of a popular form of leadership.

\textsuperscript{66} Statement of the CPUSA on the Events in Little Rock, 9 Sept 1957, Jackson papers, Box 3 Folder 13.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid.
At the behest of leaders like Jackson, the Communist Party took care to present itself to the civil rights movement as a colleague, not a superior or an adversary.

Once Eisenhower deployed the 101st Airborne Division to guide nine Black teenagers through the halls of their high school, the Party issued another statement written by James Jackson that called for “continued action.” The September 23rd statement applauded the President’s overdue effort to counteract the mob in Little Rock, but insisted that the crisis itself, along with Eisenhower’s hesitancy and the ever-loomong specter of continued violence, should become an impetus for the federal government to initiate further change. Jackson argued, “The action of the government at Little Rock must not become simply a single shot expedient. Little Rock cannot be a halfway house for the government to rest its case against the insurrectionary southern segregationists.” While it was the most newsworthy civil rights event of 1957, the Little Rock crisis was not isolated. The Party argued that, even though the violence had subsided, the incident indicated that Southern racists would fight bitterly against change, and the federal government provided the only opportunity for “broad new measures of law enforcement.” Eisenhower’s action, according to Jackson, “opens the way to a great victory for human rights and democracy over the slave-time remains of Jim Crowism.” Jackson saw the outcome of the Little Rock crisis as an opportunity to call for the expulsion of Dixiecrat congressmen and the criminal indictment of Faubus. These steps would not only offer racial justice to Southern Blacks who would have new access to opportunity in the

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70 Ibid.
71 Ibid.
absence of racist politicians creating the laws, but would also punish Jim Crow’s perpetrators.

Jackson’s statement on September 23rd went slightly further than the September 9th statement in its overt expression of Communism, but the Party’s traditions and agenda remained primarily a backdrop to the civil rights emphasis. In these statements, Jackson had successfully accomplished what he argued for in “For a Mass Policy.” Instead of an attempt to recruit civil rights workers under the Communist umbrella, Jackson set the concerns of activists already organizing as the top priority. He suggested that AFL-CIO unions could take out two-inch solidarity ads in the Arkansas State Press in order to assist its publisher Daisy Bates, who was also the NAACP leader at the forefront of the struggle. As the crisis ensued, the White Citizens Council in Arkansas intimidated the State Press’s advertisers, and the newspaper was losing money and influence out of people’s fears of retribution. Jackson sought to bring the labor movement closer to the civil rights movement, but kept his emphasis on civil rights. He employed Communist interests when they were relevant, or when they would serve to draw the attention of other Communists, but he never wavered from his stance that the civil rights movement needed the unequivocal support of the CPUSA without self-interested ulterior motives.

In seeking to connect the Party more concretely to the civil rights movement, Little Rock provided Jackson with a situation that perfectly evidenced the need for pragmatism over theory. Perhaps because he was a father reconnecting with his two daughters after nearly five years of separation, and perhaps because he saw his own

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72 Ibid., It is likely that even if the State Press received ads from unions, they would not have printed them. The State Press was forced out of print in the second year of the Little Rock Crisis, and in the run-up to its demise, Daisy and L.C. avoided printing much that would have given the White Citizens Councils cause to harass them further. See Kirk, *Redefining the Color Line* and *Beyond Little Rock*, and Stockley, *Daisy Bates*. 
children in the stoic faces of the Little Rock Nine, Jackson’s writings for the CPUSA on Little Rock emphasized that the main protagonists in the crisis were children. In an October 1957 essay entitled, “Children Challenge Bayonets at Little Rock,” Jackson argued that the Little Rock Nine were the most crucial factor in their own survival. He wrote:

In counterpoint to the animal-like exhibitionism and brutal, cowardly conduct of the white supremacist mobs, the undaunted and fearless Negro school children won the compassion, admiration, and gratitude of all decent-minded people everywhere… With heads erect, backs unbowed, fearless and unafraid, proud of their place of honor… the unfailing steps of Negro youth have set a new pace for all those who struggle on the frontiers of social progress and a new and lofty standard of courage for all its fighters to emulate.\(^\text{23}\)

In addressing a Communist audience that often bypassed practicality to dissect an issue for its theoretical roots, focusing on the pathos of the real-life confrontation between young teenagers and armed soldiers at a public high school allowed Jackson to present his analysis in such a way that bridged the gap between ideology and practice.

For Jackson, the civil rights movement had the potential to offer the Party occasion to get involved in a momentous struggle to realize democracy in the United States. As the Khrushchev report forced the CPUSA to reckon with its loyalties, its theories, and its agenda, Jackson saw civil rights action as a path toward redemption for all the groups that had been harmed or diminished by the events of the early Cold War. If unions, leftist political parties, and Black freedom movement organizations could unite behind civil rights, they could “help rout anti-Negro racism from our national life… opening wide the doors to great new initiatives of struggle to advance, under the

leadership of the working class, along the whole social frontier.” Keeping focused on the ways in which the Party could productively help the civil rights movement provided sustenance for Jackson’s Communism during the difficult 1950s. Jackson’s 1959 work on the CPUSA’s “Resolution on Theoretical Aspects of the Negro Question” drew his interest in the civil rights movement to the forefront of CPUSA discussions.

While arguing that a practical approach to civil rights merited attention, Jackson also sought to reshape the CPUSA’s theoretical approach to the movement. In an address to the Party in at its major conference in 1959, he insisted, “As vitally necessary as it is to come to grips with and resolve in the interest of clarity and sound orientation the fundamental theoretical problems… of the Negro peoples’ freedom cause – the urgent, pressing tasks of the living moment are not unrelated or irrelevant considerations in the correct achievement of this work.” In Jackson’s view, the Party’s political location on questions of race could not remain static or separate from contemporary context. As he had argued before his sentencing, Jackson saw Marxism as a flexible, changing, growing science that needed to encompass the rest of the changing political world.

Jackson’s address outlined the reaction and resistance to the civil rights movement and built the framework for the CPUSA’s discussion. He anticipated the 86th Congress’s filibuster in 1960 over civil rights legislation, addressed the “over 200 state laws against the constitutional rights of the Negro people to equal, unsegregated education,” argued that Black trade unions needed a bigger role in the Movement, and that Black Americans needed wider political representation in local, state, and federal positions. He made note of the opportunities available to the CPUSA and the civil rights

74 Ibid., 17.
75 James Jackson address on “a correct Marxist approach to a theoretical presentation to the Negro question in the US”, James and Esther Cooper Jackson Papers, Tamiment Library, NYU, Box 3, Folder 5.
movement to unite and initiate major advances, but he remained critical of Black leaders who had an “addiction to the dope of the ruling class propaganda against the communist and communism.” He also argued that white progressives should promote civil rights “in their white communities…among the white masses,” and white Communists needed to avoid “paternalism and discourtesy towards Negroes that manifest themselves in any degree within the ranks of our party.” After noting the international movements toward ending colonialism and the lingering legal “hang-overs from McCarthyism,” Jackson urged his comrades to consider theory’s practical application. The Party’s discussion, Jackson reminded his audience, should center not on “how to compress the phenomena of the Negro peoples’ movement in the US into a single given Marxist category but how to use the total science of Marxism-Leninism to serve the cause of Negro equality and freedom.”

In its discussion on the Negro Question, the Party acknowledged that its position was outdated and that revision was long overdue. Although the CPUSA noted that the improved status of African Americans in the U.S. was one reason to revise the Black Belt thesis, it also recognized that the idea of a “nation within a nation” did not necessarily fit the United States as well as it might have in the Soviet Union. The changing racial culture in the U.S. was in part due to the post-World War II migration to the North and West and in part due to improvements in the economic, social, and political position of

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76 Ibid. The Civil Rights Act of 1960 fixed some of the flaws in the 1957 Civil Rights Act, which specifically targeted voting rights. The 1957 Act granted the Federal Government jurisdiction in situations where qualified Black voters were disenfranchised. The Act did little to rectify the disenfranchisement of Blacks who could not get through the inscrutable voter registration process in many Southern locales. The 1960 Act was largely ineffective, leaving 70 percent of Black voters disenfranchised. See Steven F. Lawson and Charles Payne, Debating the civil rights movement, 1945-1968, (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1998), 16.

77 James Jackson address on “a correct Marxist approach to a theoretical presentation to the Negro question in the US.”

78 Ibid.
African Americans. Still, the Party noted that in spite of these improvements, Black Americans continued to face significant disadvantages in the areas of education, job availability, and political and economic status. Racists still murdered Blacks who asserted their rights, and Blacks “remain, very definitely, the ‘second-class citizens’ of our country…changed only in degree by the many democratic gains the Negro people have won during the past quarter-century.”

The Party also recognized James Jackson’s point that Marxism could not be applied dogmatically to the racial context of the United States. It also noted the “tragedy that our movement did not welcome [the] skepticism” of Communists who “sensed…that our slogan of ‘self-determination in the Black Belt’ [was] patently alien to the American scene,” and lamented that the debates the Party currently engaged in could have happened years earlier.

In acknowledging that its position on the Negro Question needed to be flexible in order to suit the rapidly changing times, the CPUSA opened itself to continual debate on race throughout the 1960s.

Between 1959 and 1960, the Party underwent a restructuring of its leadership to accommodate both its decrease in membership and shifts in its approach to the world around it. Its policies reflected a desire to be at the cutting edge of American politics and an effort to fit into the larger political milieu.

The CPUSA selected James Jackson as the new editor of *The Worker*, and he used that role to present the civil rights movement as the Party’s central focus. In rebuilding itself after the disastrous 1950s, James

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79 “Working material for a C.P. Discussion Resolution on Theoretical Aspects of the Negro Question,” James and Esther Cooper Jackson Papers, Tamiment Library, NYU, Box 3, Folder 3; see also Gerald Horne, *Black Liberation/Red Scare: Ben Davis and the Communist Party*.

80 “Working material for a C.P. Discussion Resolution on Theoretical Aspects of the Negro Question.”

81 Notes on a discussion of the structure of the National Committee, James and Esther Cooper Jackson Papers, box 3 folder 1, Tamiment Library, New York University.
Jackson’s pragmatism in his approach to the link between the CPUSA and civil rights proved to be a crucial tool for the Party.

As the CPUSA moved into the 1960s, its position on the civil rights movement would continue to be a rallying-cry and a source for debate internally, as well as cause for criticism from both its pro- and anti-civil rights detractors externally. The civil rights movement forced the CPUSA to engage in an important evolution of its racial politics, but that evolution was also linked with the Party’s own predicament in the 1950s. With Southern Regional Director James Jackson discreetly probing the Party’s position on race alongside the emerging civil rights movement during the early part of the 1950s, the Party’s development relied on the work of its Second Cadre leadership. While the Smith Act indictments and the national anxiety over Communism changed the shape of the Black freedom movement, the CPUSA also began to change its approach to social movements and theoretical questions. After the Second Cadre reemerged, the Party, in facing legal difficulties and the fallout from the Krushchev report, began work to reinvent itself in the public eye without sacrificing its fundamental values and core ideology. Although the CPUSA’s increased openness to change during this era did not help it to regain the status it boasted in the Popular Front years or allow it to make inroads in the civil rights movement, its internal evolution reflects an organization that still saw itself as vital, and still sought allies and relevance. Jackson, with his heart deeply entrenched in both movements, continued to navigate, analyze, and define the link between Communism and civil rights.
Chapter 6
“The Opportunity to Speak for Ourselves”
The Jacksons, *The Worker, Freedomways*, and the 1960s Black Freedom Movement

Although part of James Jackson’s purpose in the Communist Party’s underground from 1951 to 1955 was to create a more democratic world for his daughters to grow up in, he missed out on the day-to-day life of a father. When he emerged and settled his legal troubles, he and his wife knew that renewed stability and support for their daughters would be paramount. When Kathy, now in sixth grade, brought home history homework in 1958 that glorified the South’s redemption after Reconstruction, the Jacksons took immediate action. Writing jointly, the couple penned a letter to her teacher that excused their daughter from the assignment and argued, “Is it for my daughter, a Negro child, to join in the authors’ gladness that ‘the white people got control once more’ (see question 6 on page 9 of the text)...Indeed, there is a direct chain of historic linkage between the KKK against Negroes in overthrowing Reconstruction and the conduct of [Governor Orval Faubus] to assault the constitution and drive little Negro children from school doors in the South.”

Though James and Esther Cooper Jackson had lived together briefly before World War II and in Detroit before the McCarthy period, James Jackson’s emergence from the Second Cadre allowed the couple to build a new home life in which their gender egalitarianism, family devotion, and political ideals would keep them together.

Part of the couple’s reunion involved finding new career paths that would contribute to their family’s security and serve as an expression of their political ideals.

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1 Letter to Mr. Abramowitz, James and Esther Cooper Jackson Papers, Box 6, Folder 19, New York University, Tamiment Library, New York, NY.
James Jackson remained a part of the Communist Party, USA leadership and became the editor of its newspaper, *The Worker*, in 1959. Esther Cooper Jackson was a founder and the managing editor of *Freedomways* magazine, a quarterly journal of the Black freedom movement. The years the couple spent apart during World War II and the 1950s helped to set the foundation for their independent and often different editorial perspectives in the 1960s. Through *The Worker* and *Freedomways*, James and Esther Cooper Jackson found individual career paths that allowed them to adhere to their ideals, engage with the Black freedom movement, and live comfortably together with their daughters after nearly two decades of intermittent separation and political upheaval. The editorial positions allowed the Jacksons’ activism to coexist with their love and family life in a way it had not previously, as their independent careers served as an expression of renewed family stability.

As *The Worker* editor, Jackson emphasized the civil rights movement as a cause the CPUSA should support without imposing its own agenda. Jackson offered favorable editorials on civil rights triumphs, criticized the economic roots of racism in the United States, and advocated for criminal indictments of politicians, police, and civilians who violated the civil rights of Blacks across the nation. Jackson’s editorials offered an analysis of race and civil rights in the United States that was much further to the left than any mainstream newspaper. This was in part because the CPUSA was not burdened by the need to retain public favor, as its ideological opponents did not typically subscribe to the paper. Rather, Jackson and other Communists believed, by offering an analysis that showed support for civil rights and reflected the Party’s ideas, *The Worker* could help the CPUSA win back some support. By offering the Party’s support to the civil rights
movement, a cause that was uniquely rooted in American democratic ideals, Jackson hoped to demonstrate that Communists were a vital part of national political discourse, patriotic in their own right, and willing to back movements without the direct involvement of the Soviet Union.

Jackson was inexperienced in the field of editing, so upon becoming editor of *The Worker* he signed up for an editing course at New York University.² He planned to revamp the newspaper, which had suffered alongside the Party during the McCarthy years. The newspaper, once a vibrant daily, became a weekly publication and was in the midst of a massive restructuring in the early 1960s, and one of Jackson’s goals was to reestablish *The Worker* as a daily periodical. Busy with his editorial work, he wrote to his friends John and Margrit Pittman, “The new duties have kept my feet to the fire and my head in a whirl… I think already we have some improvements in political content.”³ John Pittman was a Black Communist originally from Atlanta who became a newspaper editor in California. He married Margrit Adler, a German-Jewish refugee and fellow Communist. From 1959-1961, the pair lived in Moscow as correspondents for the Party’s newspapers. Jackson expressed his appreciation for the news stories the Pittmans sent from Moscow, and promised to “use them better and catch up,” then directed the couple to the paper’s stories about the South, which “is really jumping these days. It is really the big story stateside.”⁴

For Esther Cooper Jackson, Communism was an important part of her individual political identity, but dedication to her political ideals did not come with the same organizational commitment to the CPUSA as her husband’s. After joining the Party in

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² James E. Jackson to John and Margrit Pittman, 8 March 1960, Jackson papers, Box 9 Folder 21.
³ Ibid. See also John Pittman Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University.
⁴ Jackson to Pittmans.
1939 with some hesitation that membership would compromise her political independence, Cooper Jackson used her Communist political affiliation as just one path toward achieving her objectives. Though she never formally left the Party, she became inactive after the McCarthy years. She had a number of reasons for her decision, including news of the 1956 Khrushchev Report on Stalin’s brutality and some exhaustion after the challenges she confronted while her husband was underground and stood trial.

After spending a few years trying to figure out how best to support her family and maintain her activism, Cooper Jackson joined forces with W.E.B. and Shirley Graham Du Bois and founded *Freedomways Magazine*.

*Freedomways* afforded Esther Cooper Jackson a new kind of independence. Though she and her husband built their marriage around the notion of women’s equality, her past activism and careers had been intertwined with her relationship with her husband. In the 1960s, after the decades of turmoil, Cooper Jackson’s independent career represented her ability to express her politics in a forum that was not directly connected to her husband’s work or political predicaments. *Freedomways* became a path for Cooper Jackson to promote her gender ideology, politics, and activism. The magazine represented her political identity as a Popular Front activist, and in selecting the range of articles that *Freedomways* published, Cooper Jackson displayed her position on the growing Black freedom movement on its pages.

The periodicals provided an ideal forum for the Jacksons to continue contributing to the Black freedom movement as seasoned, mature activists. *Freedomways*, in particular, strove to represent all of the segments of the Black freedom movement,

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5 Esther Cooper Jackson interview with Erik McDuffie, James and Esther Cooper Jackson Papers, Box 1 Folder 25.
including liberal civil rights, Black nationalism, cultural expression and internationalism. Though *The Worker*’s primary purpose was to promote the Party’s positions and goals, the newspaper attempted to illustrate that the Party’s interests were not all that different from those of the civil rights movement. *The Worker* offered frequent analysis of the ways in which capitalism and class exploitation perpetuated racism in the United States, offering an angle on the civil rights movement that mainstream news outlets avoided. Jackson also used the paper to highlight the ways in which political repression similarly influenced both the Party and the civil rights movement.

These two publications illustrate that while the Cold War restricted more radical forms of activism in the United States, dedicated leftists continued to challenge conventional thinking and engage with civil rights discourse. The Jacksons’ lives reveal that Cold War anticommunism influenced the direction and methods of the civil rights movement in the 1960s, but did not prevent Communists from contributing to the broad ideological struggle against racial injustice in the United States. Between the two publications, James and Esther Cooper Jackson’s editorial roles highlight the continuity from the Popular Front to civil rights and the places where their individual activism overlapped and diverged. Though the civil rights movement had a complicated relationship with the left wing as the Cold War restricted U.S. activism, the Jacksons’ editorial work points to a more fluid collaboration among activists across the political spectrum. Both *The Worker* and *Freedomways*, along with other periodicals including the *National Guardian*, championed civil rights as the movement gained momentum, and both were on the perimeter of the mainstream news media because of their leftwing orientation. As editors, James and Esther Cooper Jackson maintained their activism by
calling attention to forms of racism in the United States, from the most egregious to the subtlest, reporting on efforts at resistance, and analyzing the political, social, and cultural systems governing race relations in the United States.

*Freedomways* grew out of Paul Robeson’s newspaper, *Freedom*, which ran from 1951 to 1955. *Freedom* published the work of Black artists and intellectuals, and offered a rare leftist political commentary in the early 1950s. It suffered in the context of the Cold War, particularly given the difficulties that Paul Robeson confronted as anticommmunist sentiment increased, and *Freedom* ceased publication after four years.6

The *Freedomways* organizers, including SNYC veterans Ed Strong and Louis Burnham, along with the Du Boises and Cooper Jackson, spent a year fundraising, planning, and gathering support for the journal. In 1960, both Louis Burnham and Ed Strong passed away, and Cooper Jackson and Shirley Graham Du Bois assumed the editorial responsibilities. They established an editorial philosophy based on intellectual independence and did not rely on “big foundation money,” which “meant more people participated and supported the journal.”7 The journal’s staff and contributors celebrated its debut in April 1961 at the Hotel Martinique in New York City.

As editors of *Freedomways*, Cooper Jackson and Graham Du Bois outlined its purpose in the first issue. They situated themselves as a key link between an older generation of activists and the new civil rights workers. The journal’s primary goal was to provide a forum for discussion, and the editors stated:

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6. Robeson’s passport was revoked in 1950, which prohibited him from performing overseas. As his popularity as a performer waned in the United States when anticommmunist sentiment increased, Robeson was no longer able to make a living by performing. See Martin Duberman, *Paul Robeson: A Biography*, (New York: The New Press, 1988).

FREEDOMWAYS is born of the necessity for a vehicle of communication which will mirror developments in the diversified and many-sided struggles of the Negro people. It will provide a public forum for the review, examination, and debate of all problems confronting Negroes in the United States.⁸

Cooper Jackson and Graham Du Bois emphasized that the journal had no formal connection with any organizations or institutions, and had no specific political ties. Instead, the journal “offers all of us the opportunity to speak for ourselves.”⁹ Noted writer James Baldwin, a member of the Freedomways editorial board, juxtaposed art and politics when he wrote of the magazine, “Its in-depth coverage and analysis of important developments on African and Asian continents, its poetry, short stories, art and photography make FREEDOMWAYS a most complete magazine.”¹⁰ For Cooper Jackson, Freedomways offered a means for her to continue her Popular Front style activism in a forum that made a distinct contribution to the Black freedom movement.

Freedomways strove to represent the desires and goals of African Americans across the nation of varying political perspectives, and the editors stated that “those who commit themselves to its support become patrons only of a publication and an editorial policy designed to provide an open forum for the free expression of ideas. Sponsors of the publication will assume no responsibility for the particular views of any of its contributors; nor will contributors be constrained to abide by any editorial preference or bias of the publishers or editors.”¹¹ In her role as Managing Editor, Cooper Jackson “shaped [the journal’s] intellectual direction and was the energy behind it.”¹² The journal’s style of wide-ranging, open political expression aptly reflects the activist style

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⁸ Ibid., xix.
⁹ Ibid.
¹⁰ James Baldwin, letter to potential subscribers, 1964, Jackson Papers, Box 8 Folder 1.
¹² Nash and Leab, 228.
Cooper Jackson had honed since the late 1930s. Though Cooper Jackson remained with the magazine for its twenty-five year duration, *Freedomways*’ other editors changed periodically and included, at one point or another, scholar John Henrik Clarke, artist Margaret Burroughs, activist Jack O’Dell, activist Angela Davis, poet Keith E. Baird, cartoonist Brumsic Brandon, Jr., novelist John Oliver Killens, activist W. Alphaeus Hunton, editor George B. Murphy, librarian Ernest Kaiser, and activist Jean Carey Bond.

The magazine received some grant money, but operated on a small budget of subscription funds and fundraising efforts. *Freedomways* ran fundraisers regularly. Actors and musicians loaned their talents for public events, and artists contributed works for greeting cards and auctions.

*Freedomways* reflected its editors’ desire to maintain intellectual independence as the U.S.’s conflict with the Soviet Union shaped public life and political expression. In the 1960s, the Cold War continued to influence daily life as tense global events consumed American politics during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. Politicians kept up efforts to restrict political activism aimed at altering the racial status quo. But in the absence of widespread McCarthy-style witch-hunts, many of the early domestic anxieties of the Cold War had subsided and the United States adjusted to the state of perpetual diplomatic conflict. As a new generation began to dominate the civil rights movement, young activists who had not weathered the difficulties of McCarthyism

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were increasingly bold and eschewed some of the caution that their elders had been conditioned to embrace.

The Movement’s increasing momentum as the 1960s approached was in part a result of the successes in Montgomery and Little Rock, and in part a response to the continued resistance to change and the violent white backlash it produced. While organizations like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) worked for the common cause of equality and freedom for African Americans, as more individuals got involved and brought new perspectives to the table, the Movement’s ideological scope widened. In particular, younger activists from the North as well as the South came to the civil rights movement with different ideas about the Movement’s leadership style. While the SCLC and the NAACP operated with a hierarchical, clear leadership apparatus and used charismatic figures to inspire and instruct Southern masses, the student organizers of SNCC promoted “group-centered leadership.” SNCC’s style encouraged anyone who wanted to lead to do so, and “the role of spokesperson rotated among all those who desired to serve.”

SNCC’s organizers were less hesitant in toeing the line of acceptable political discourse than their elder counterparts in SCLC and the NAACP, for instance. The organization never adopted a provision against Communist participation, unlike most


activist organizations in the Cold War years. Because SNCC emerged after
McCarthyism had essentially dissipated, its young organizers honed their activist
ideology without the same fears that had hounded their older colleagues in the movement.
The organization embraced political inclusiveness as a key component in its mission. As
the historian Clayborne Carson has written, youth leaders in SNCC were “typically less
willing than other civil rights groups to impose its ideas on local black leaders or to
restrain southern black militancy.” SNCC ventured into uncharted territory for the civil
rights movement, including rural Mississippi, and the organization’s experiences on the
ground pushed it toward a “secular, humanistic radicalism” and eventually Black
power. To segregationists, however, SNCC’s radicalism differed little from the liberal
organizations like SCLC and the NAACP, as all worked to change the racial status quo
and chip away at the “states’ rights” defense of legalized racial terror.

*Freedomways* emerged as the civil rights movement was growing and splintering.
The expanding ideological breadth of the civil rights movement in the early 1960s
presented a unique opportunity for the editors of *Freedomways* to draw on their activist
backgrounds in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s. Connected to Communists, liberals, artists,
intellectuals, politicians, and activist leaders, *Freedomways* drew contributors of varying
ideological and political perspectives that broke down barriers between the left and the
middle of the Black political spectrum. From the vantage points of a number of
organizations that may have had disagreements with each other, *Freedomways* offered a
forum for conversation, debate, and political expression.

In striving to present an array of perspectives on the Black freedom movement,

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Freedomways juxtaposed the work of individuals without heavy commentary, allowing readers to assess the sides of debates for themselves. These debates encompassed liberal, socialist, and nationalist views, and Freedomways hoped to represent it all. This was especially true, as the literary scholar James Smethurst has written, “once the civil rights movement and the rise of Black Power had blunted Cold War divisions and taboos within the African American community a bit.”\(^{18}\) The novelist John Oliver Killens once described the magazine’s editorial point of view as, “Black nationalist with a socialist perspective,” though the journal regularly included contributions from liberal writers who advocated integration.\(^{19}\) In fact, as the historian Ian Rocksborough-Smith argues, the Popular Front background of Freedomways’ editors led them to emphasize coalitions and embrace radicalism, but the magazine “continued to favour the non-violent tactics of the Southern freedom movement.”\(^{20}\)

A key debate in the early 1960s Black freedom movement evolved between Black nationalists and civil rights advocates. Black leaders clashed over how to best solve the centuries-old problem of racial oppression in the United States. Martin Luther King, Jr. promoted civil rights and nonviolent integration, and in the public view, represented the movement’s moral core. He declared, “Through nonviolent resistance the Negro will be able to rise to the noble height of opposing the unjust system while loving the perpetrators of the system.”\(^{21}\) King won the support of white liberals, credibility with politicians, and had significant success in achieving national attention for civil rights.

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\(^{21}\) David Howard Pitney, *Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and the Civil Rights Struggle of the 1950s and 1960s*, (Boston: Bedford St. Martins, 2004), 120.
For African Americans, nonviolence offered empowerment and integration brought gradual and pragmatic results.

In contrast, nationalists like Malcolm X offered African Americans a separatist alternative, arguing that African Americans needed their own nation and had the right to defend themselves against white violence. He drew on Robert F. Williams, the Monroe, North Carolina NAACP leader when he argued in favor of self-defense. Williams wrote, “In a civilized society the law is a deterrent against the strong who would take advantage of the weak, but the South is not a civilized society; the South is a social jungle.”

Malcolm X echoed that sentiment in criticizing King’s emphasis on morality, arguing, “Tactics based solely on morality can only succeed when you are dealing with a people who are moral or a system that is moral.” Black nationalism afforded African Americans autonomy and control over their own fates and culture. Whites did not embrace Black nationalism as they did with nonviolence, in part because it undermined white engagement with civil rights causes, and even sympathetic whites felt threatened by separatist ideology. As contrasting viewpoints, liberal integrationism and nationalism embraced similar fundamental goals, including political and economic liberty for African Americans, but mobilized different tactics and envisioned divergent outcomes.

The divide between nonviolence and nationalism evolved further as national politics began to influence civil rights. When Lyndon Johnson became President, he took on Kennedy’s civil rights agenda and made it a priority. Johnson, a former senator from Texas, had sway with southern Democrats and was persistent in ensuring that legislation guaranteeing voting rights and ending legal segregation would pass. In 1964, Johnson...

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23 David Howard Pitney, *Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and the Civil Rights Struggle of the 1950s and 1960s*, 98.
signed into law the Civil Rights Act initiated by Kennedy the previous year. In the past, civil rights legislation fell short of guaranteeing full equality under the law and included a number of compromises conceived to appease southern politicians. This time, the legislation had a much further reach, outlawing segregation in public spaces and schools and establishing the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. The Act, coming from a Democratic administration, began a massive shift of Southern voters to the Republican Party, strengthening a new wave of conservatism nationally.\textsuperscript{24}

Johnson’s 1964 presidential nomination, nevertheless, antagonized some of the most militant forces within the civil rights movement. The Mississippi Democratic Party, still clinging to its segregationist structure, refused to include any Black delegates at the Democratic National Convention. Most Black Mississippians were still unable to vote, and Jim Crow died a slow death in the state. Frustrated, Mississippi Black voters and SNCC formed the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) and sent an integrated slate of delegates to the convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Confronted by this challenge to the regular Mississippi delegation, Democratic Party leaders offered a compromise that involved seating two delegates from the MFDP along with members of the regular party who promised to support Johnson for president. The MFDP rejected the compromise, believing that it had both moral and legal justification for its position. Though the MFDP returned to Mississippi and supported Johnson for president, many members of SNCC denounced white liberals for abandoning the cause of Blacks.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{24} Bruce J. Schulman, \textit{Lyndon B. Johnson and American Liberalism: A Brief History with Documents}, (Boston: Bedford St. Martin’s, 1995).

The MFDP’s point was clear and civil rights leaders redoubled their efforts to obtain equal access to the franchise for Black Southerners. In early 1965 in Selma, Alabama, Dr. King and the SCLC began a mass voting rights campaign, which ran into fierce resistance. After the murder of a civil rights worker, Jimmie Lee Jackson, the SCLC planned a march from Selma to the state capitol in Montgomery. The event generated national media attention when local police and state troopers tear-gassed and physically attacked peaceful marchers crossing the Edmund Pettis Bridge out of Selma on Sunday, March 7, 1965. Later that month, demonstrators finally made the pilgrimage to Montgomery under the watchful eyes of federal troops sent by the Johnson Administration to protect them. The president went even further by guiding into law over the next few months the powerful Voting Rights Act, which he signed on August 6. The legislation removed barriers to the franchise for African Americans in the South, and the government sent federal registrars to especially troublesome areas across the region, including Selma, to ensure that registration rights were available to all.26

The Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts scored substantial victories for the civil rights movement, but they did not resolve all of the problems Blacks across the nation confronted on a daily basis. In the North, *de facto* segregation and racism created a situation in which African Americans were more subtly denied opportunities, and in the absence of a movement targeted at their oppression, frustrations began to mount. Federal laws ensuring that Jim Crow was no longer a legal way of life had little meaning in areas that had no segregation laws to begin with. In Northern cities in particular, a pattern of residential segregation dating back to the New Deal and job discrimination resulted in the

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concentration of poverty among African Americans. In addition, many majority Black urban areas experienced daily conflicts with local white police forces.\(^{27}\) In 1964, Harlem and the Bedford Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn erupted in protest.

Racial tensions between white police officers, white landlords, and Black residents in Harlem and Bedford Stuyvesant had begun to boil over in 1963. The strife in Harlem first centered on high rents for squalid living conditions. In comparison to rental rates in other parts of New York City, Harlem’s cost of living was exorbitant, and inattentive white landlords who lived in other areas let buildings deteriorate. Jesse Gray, a local activist, led Harlem residents in a rent strike. In November 1963, Gray organized a fifteen-block protest in which residents brought both live and dead rats to a hearing in civil court. The goal of the protest was to highlight unsanitary infestations overtaking overpriced Harlem apartments.\(^{28}\)

Tensions continued to mount in 1964 as Black nationalist sentiment rose and conditions festered. On July 16, 1964, an off-duty white police officer named Thomas Gilligan shot a Black fifteen-year-old named James Powell. Ten days of racial violence ensued as white police officers bloodily beat protestors, including Gray, who called for “100 skilled revolutionaries who are ready to die” to engage in “guerilla warfare” and orchestrate “a black takeover of the city.”\(^{29}\) The conflict in Harlem spilled over into


Bedford Stuyvesant, a neighborhood whose own tensions had been brewing for years. In 1965, a few days after passage of the Voting Rights Act, a rebellion consumed Watts, Los Angeles. Over the next several years, similar uprisings took place across urban industrial centers, including Newark, New Jersey and Detroit, Michigan. Though most of the casualties of the rebellions resulted from police violence against Black protestors, the violence and destruction associated with the uprisings altered public perception of the Black freedom movement.

As riots in the North overtook nonviolent Southern protests in the headlines, white news reporters struggled to explain the shift. National reports offered oversimplified summaries of the events with little analysis of the conditions that produced the strife. As Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff have written, “Blacks complained that television portrayed the militancy of black power without explaining that it could be regarded as an understandable reaction to persistent white racism; they said that television was ‘simplistically’ focusing on the violence and mayhem of the riots without devoting equal time to the underlying problems of urban blacks.” In part, national coverage of urban rebellions in the North catered to white audiences who had fled the inner cities for the white suburbs since the postwar years along with whites who tentatively remained in the cities, and reporters were unable to make the frustration Blacks felt about their circumstances palatable for their audiences. *Freedomways* and *The Worker*, in contrast, focused on the root causes of the uprisings and offered a counterpoint to national coverage.

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As northern Blacks expressed their frustrations in violence, southern Blacks continued to confront the lingering problem of white racism. In 1966, James Meredith decided to walk alone from Memphis, Tennessee to Jackson, Mississippi, “against fear” of segregation, racism, and continued disenfranchisement. Meredith was known for his struggle to enroll at segregated Ole Miss in 1962, a civil rights crisis that led white students to riot and resulted in two deaths. On the second day of his march against fear, an unemployed white man from Memphis named Aubrey James Norvell shot and injured Meredith.

In response, civil rights leaders from SNCC, SCLC, and CORE vowed to continue the march. The marchers faced belligerent white troopers on the road, and in Greenwood, Mississippi, SNCC chairman Stokely Carmichael was arrested. Frustrated by resistance to the march in Mississippi and increasingly disillusioned by the commitment of white liberals and the Johnson Administration, especially in the wake of the MFDP compromise, Carmichael offered a new slogan for the Black freedom movement. He told his audience in Greenwood, “This is the twenty-seventh time that I’ve been arrested. I ain’t going to jail no more. The only way we gonna stop them white men from whuppin’ us is to take over. What we gonna start sayin’ now is Black Power!”

Carmichael’s frustration and new declaration resonated with his audience and with African Americans across the country, and kick started a shift in SNCC and CORE as they began to embrace Black nationalism and self-defense strategies.

While Martin Luther King, Jr., and SCLC “represented an unwillingness to wait for racial justice,” Carmichael’s cry, “portrayed the impatient face of political anger.”

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31 Joseph, Waiting ‘Til the Midnight Hour, 132-142.
32 Joseph, 146.
King kept the Black Power movement at arm’s length, but recognized that the ideology behind it represented the needs of the Black masses. He differed with Black Power advocates on the point of self-defense, staunchly advocating nonviolence, but embraced the idea that Blacks would “realize deliverance only when they have accumulated the power to enforce change.” While the mainstream news media reported that the new “Black Power” slogan was “a racist philosophy” and a “distorted cry,” and looked to leaders like King to quell fears, King did not denounce Black Power or Carmichael.

Black Power embodied political, ideological, social, economic, and cultural goals. As the historian William Van Deberg writes, “Black Power is best understood as a broad, adaptive, cultural term serving to connect and illuminate the differing ideological orientations of the movement’s supporters.” Black Power advocates saw little hope in integration, and believed Blacks should take control of their communities to fight racism, police brutality, and discrimination. President Lyndon Johnson, whose passion for domestic issues took a backseat to his commitment to the unpopular Vietnam War, appeared increasingly unable to produce lasting, fundamental change to the structure of race relations in the United States. In this regard, national politics and diplomacy aided the rise of Black Power ideology because it fostered frustration with slow civil rights implementation and again juxtaposed the government’s concern with democracy abroad and its failure to support its Black citizens at home.

In response to the emergence of Black Power, Freedomways “offered a form of black radicalism that reconciled issues of cultural autonomy and leftist radicalism with

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33 Ibid., 197.
34 Ibid., 146.
mainstream initiatives in the electoral and legislative spheres." Alongside articles by moderate and radical grassroots activists, artists, and writers, the journal published the work of Black African and Caribbean leaders. Contributors like Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, and Cheddi Jagan of Guyana were at the helm of a long international freedom movement that was deeply entangled in Cold War diplomacy. They offered political commentary on socialism, capitalism, and democracy in Africa and the Caribbean, the U.S.-Soviet conflict, and the independence of their nations. Former Popular Front activists, Communists, and others on the left offered radical critiques of U.S. capitalism, commentary on the civil rights struggles in the South, labor, and artistic work. More moderate civil rights leaders including Whitney Young of the National Urban League and the Reverend Milton Galamison, a Brooklyn community leader, also contributed, representing more centrist perspectives. As managing editor, Cooper Jackson incorporated a range of viewpoints on civil rights into the magazine, which resulted in a quarterly that tilted further to the left than mainstream discussion of the civil rights movement.

Most national newspapers and magazines sought to present the civil rights movement to national readers as an epic struggle against a clear evil, highlighting white violence against nonviolent protesters. They described the efforts of civil rights activists as patriotic demonstrations that reflected American ideals, and portrayed the Movement positively. In contrast, regional Southern media outlets regularly reported that Martin Luther King, Jr. was either a Communist or supported Communists. Attacks on King’s alleged subversion in the press bolstered the white South’s efforts to brand all those who fought racism as Communists. Occasionally, the Associated Press would pick up these

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36 Rocksborough-Smith, 53.
stories, giving them national distribution. In one instance, a story that linked King, SNCC, the NAACP, and the SCLC to the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF), a left-leaning organization that had weathered the McCarthy era, was printed in the Jackson Advocate in Mississippi, picked up by the AP, was reprinted in the Jackson Clarion-Ledger where the headline read, “M.L. King Linked to Red Front.” A state representative read the article aloud on the floor of the House of Representatives. The article and others like it bolstered FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover’s crusade to unveil King’s allegedly hidden Communist inclinations, and the Bureau regularly distributed similar stories. Some of those articles were printed in the North, as well, including the Long Island Star-Journal.37

King and other civil rights leaders had a number of important connections to Communists and former Communists, but the meaning of those connections was veiled by the mere fact that they existed. The Kennedy Administration, the FBI, and the right wing viewed any connection to communism as a threat.38 Linking communism to civil rights allowed reactionary Southern whites to believe that the civil rights movement was not only contrary to their way of life, but also fundamentally un-American. The Kennedy Administration was nervous about civil rights leaders’ communist connections, and their response to those connections validated reactionary whites on a national scale.

Realistically, however, Black leaders in the 1960s would have been hard-pressed to establish connections with leaders of an older generation who were not, in one way or another, linked with the Popular Front. Some distanced themselves from those

38 See Branch, Parting the Waters.
connections, including A. Philip Randolph, who led the National Negro Congress during the Popular Front years. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s father gave opening sermons at Southern Negro Youth Congress events. And while many of the older civil rights leaders in the 1960s were ardently anticommunist, including Whitney Young and Roy Wilkins, their organizations took on the task of balancing complicated local needs, national politics, and their own ideologies. As the historian Jonathan Holloway has written, local NAACP chapters in the 1930s “worked cooperatively with labor and were developing a mass base…the association was aggressively working to secure equal pay for equal work.” While McCarthyism and its legacies influenced the Black freedom movement in the United States by quieting leftist activists who had Communist connections in the 1930s and 1940s, it did not create a clean break between one era and another.

Civil rights leaders did not exclusively pander to Cold War ideology, even when they espoused anticommunist political perspectives and did not believe completely restructuring the U.S. economy was a necessity. In spite of liberal rhetoric that promoted integration as a social and legal, not economic, issue, integrationism incorporated the fight against job discrimination, equal access to resources, and achieving middle class ideals. The distinction between the civil rights era and the Popular Front was the way in which economics manifested. Liberal civil rights leaders could hardly promote middle class ideals without addressing the issue of poverty, and they did so. Popular Front activists tackled similar issues, but did not see middle class status as a fundamental American goal.

Another tension in the 1960s that had roots in the Popular Front era was between civil rights activists and labor leaders. After unions purged their ranks of the leftist and Communist organizers who had promoted interracial working-class unity as an essential element of the labor movement, a coalition between labor and civil rights grew increasingly unlikely. As the historian Robert Korstad writes, “Throughout the 1960s, the FBI and white supremacist groups kept up a drumbeat of pressure by taking every opportunity to tar a new generation of activists.” Red-baiting and racism led to an “absence of radical, union-based leaders and institutions” in the civil rights movement.  

The complicated relationship between labor and civil rights created conflict in Party leadership, as well. James Jackson wrote to Party chairman Gus Hall, “some seem to think that being pro-labor means that Negro workers have no right to challenge the assumptions of special privileges and preferential status in hiring, promotion and apprenticeship prerogatives of white workers. Such a position is anti-Negro workers’ interests. That which is anti-Negro is anti-labor.” In other words, the political context of the Cold War in the 1960s made labor and race separate issues that no longer intersected.

Postwar red-baiting reinforced white supremacy by equating efforts to improve the condition of the working class, Black and white, with communism, and made labor’s role in the 1960s civil rights movement all the more complex. Blacks were almost wholly absent from craft unions in the mid-1960s, and, as the historian Michael Honey

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41 James Jackson to Gus Hall, Jackson papers, Box 8 Folder 24.
writes, “The merger of AFL and CIO unions beginning in the midfifties further muted the distinctive interracial presence that industrial unions once provided, placing whites in an increasingly dominant position within the labor movement.”

Though Black workers continued to participate in unions to protect their rights as workers, the decline of interracial solidarity within unions meant that labor organizations were no longer a source for civil rights activism. Unions like the AFL-CIO and the United Auto Workers provided civil rights efforts with funds and political support, but unity among Black and white workers on the ground was increasingly difficult to forge.

Though unions were no longer a major source of civil rights protest, economic concerns remained an important part of the civil rights movement. As the range of essays in *Freedomways* demonstrates, Black leaders remained interested in economics, poverty, and labor exploitation as fundamental causes of racial inequality even as the Cold War led people to shy away from fighting for a change to major economic systems. Though the civil rights movement that the mainstream media captured emphasized integration, legal rights, and political agency, and did not hint at economics as a cause of disparity, the pages of *Freedomways* present a different face of the civil rights movement. With editors like Esther Cooper Jackson who planted their activist roots in the Popular Front years, *Freedomways* did not disregard economic issues. The magazine showed no trepidation in openly presenting economic concerns, in spite of the Cold War’s repressive atmosphere. A number of articles focused on the economics of racism came from leftist activists like former SNYC member, dismissed SCLC leader, and Communist Jack

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42 Honey, 276.
43 Ibid., 277.
O’Dell. But liberals including National Urban League director Whitney Young, Illinois NAACP leader Lester Davis, and the Reverend Milton Galamison also contributed articles that analyzed poverty, labor inequality, and residential segregation as key forces driving the civil rights movement. That economic exploitation, poverty, and job discrimination were inherently linked to political and social rights did not disappear from the minds of civil rights leaders when the Cold War began.

In the 1962 summer issue of *Freedomways*, Whitney Young contributed an article based on a speech he gave to the National Conference of Social Welfare in New York City titled, “What Price Prejudice? On the Economics of Discrimination.” Young argued that poverty contributed to “family disorganization” among African Americans, an academic theme that had been gaining popular appeal since the publication of E. Franklin Frazier’s *The Negro Family in the United States*. Young, widely known for his ability

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44 Jack O’Dell, a former member of the SNYC Miami chapter, became acquainted with Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1959 and became an executive assistant to King in 1962 after Attorney Stanley Levinson recommended him for the job. Levinson, a white socialist, had long supported progressive and humanitarian causes, including the defense of the Smith Act defendants in 1949 and the Rosenbergs from 1950 to 1953. He was active as a civil rights attorney and formed an organization with Bayard Rustin in 1956 called In Friendship, through which he met King. His relationship with Martin Luther King, Jr. raised eyebrows, but as the historian Taylor Branch notes, King “found nothing objectionable about Levinson, least of all his radical connections.” King was no Communist, but he “never wavered in support of the victims of McCarthyism or in his sympathy with Communist advocacy for the oppressed.” 44

The FBI and the Kennedys believed King’s association with Levinson was problematic, and when O’Dell entered the mix, FBI surveillance of SCLC increased. The Bureau was well aware of O’Dell’s history, and believed that he was elected to the CPUSA’s National Committee in 1959 using the name “Cornelius James.” When they learned of O’Dell’s new role in SCLC, one agent wrote, “In view of the continued activity of Levinson and O’Dell and the fact they exert influence on King, it is deemed advisable to again ask for a review of the appropriate field office files to determine if any CP direction and infiltration of the SCLC has developed.” O’Dell remained in the SCLC fold quietly until 1963, when, in the midst of SCLC’s massive, decisive campaign in Birmingham, the *Birmingham News* reported that O’Dell continued to receive a paycheck from the organization. When the news broke that O’Dell had not actually resigned from SCLC, King and others met with him and formally removed him from the organization’s roster. See Diane McWhorter, *Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama: The Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001); David Garrow, *The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.: From Solo to Memphis*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1981), 50-51; Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 209. See also, David Garrow, *The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.: From Solo to Memphis*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1981).

45 Frazier’s *The Negro Family in the United States* argued that social circumstances shaped the structure of Black families in the United States. Frazier’s argument that race was not a sole determinant of behavior
to get economic backing for the National Urban League from major corporations, offered a pointed critique of capitalist consumption as a source for the social and familial problems of African Americans.

Young framed “his argument by outlining the significance of poverty in United States culture. He wrote:

What does being without money mean in a society whose values are highly materialistic, whose consumer production everywhere displayed are without precedent, and where the acquisition of everything in that society, both tangible and intangible, requires money? In these terms it means little food, little housing, little health, little education, little culture, little status, and little citizenship.\(^\text{46}\)

Young’s essay did not argue that capitalism was the source of the problems poor Black families faced; rather, he argued that without access to capitalist accumulation and consumption, African Americans had limited access to the economic resources that would define their citizenship. The distinction between capitalism as the problem and access to capitalism’s benefits as the problem represented the key difference between the role of economics in the Popular Front and the civil rights years.

Young argued that Black fathers who were unable to find suitable employment were “made to feel inadequate, not because he lacks love and affection, intelligence or even a grey flannel suit, but because in a society that measures him by the size of his paycheck he just doesn’t stand very tall.” As a result, Black mothers needed to find employment as well and become “a major breadwinner—if not the only breadwinner of


the family [who] assumes roles and responsibilities far beyond her ability to perform any of them too well.” Young argued that as Black families struggled to compete for the means to full citizenship—stable, adequate housing, full employment, and access to amenities—the circumstances that resulted produced “broken homes, delinquency, drop-outs, crime, illegitimacy, and other social disorganization.”

In the midst of the Cold War, when any critique of capitalism could become a source of government harassment and Southern conservatives sought to connect economic and racial protest to an effort to undermine the government, Young’s *Freedomways* article pointed out that Black family life was inextricably linked to capitalist society and full American citizenship. In fact, by presenting the image of a normative nuclear family as something that African Americans aspired to, but fell short of because of economic disparities, Young reinforced cultural values in the Cold War United States.

Other activists used *Freedomways* to make arguments that connected economic disparities to the civil rights movement in the early 1960s as well. Jimmy McDonald, a CORE activist, wrote of his experiences as a Freedom Rider in 1961. CORE initiated integrated bus rides through the South in 1961 to test the Interstate Commerce Commission’s commitment to enforcing the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Boytont vs. Virginia* (1960), which formally desegregated bus terminals in the South. The Freedom Riders met with violent white resistance at a number of stops through the South, including a firebombing in Anniston, Alabama. Riders were beaten and jailed. CORE’s commitment to nonviolence met with the excessive violence of white supremacists and

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47 Ibid.
created a crisis that required federal intervention, a tactic that activists relied on throughout the civil rights movement.\textsuperscript{48}

In the middle of the Freedom Rides, the Kennedy Administration called for a “cooling off” period to let tensions subside before the bus trip resumed. In his *Freedomways* article, McDonald argued that the Freedom Rides had a significance that extended beyond integrated bus terminals. Asserting that job discrimination was a significant source of strife and that it reinforced inequality in social and political life, he wrote, “We do not want our women to have to work for the white women because our men are denied the right to a well-paying and challenging job. We are tired of being porters with college degrees.”\textsuperscript{49} McDonald also assailed trade unions in the South, arguing that they “have made very few and very weak attempts to organize a full civil rights program, even within the limited framework of the union.”\textsuperscript{50} Efforts to attain equality across the South by integrating social spaces symbolized broader change for African Americans. By fighting for equal access to bus terminals, lunch counters, and schools, civil rights workers were also fighting for equal access to opportunities for jobs, housing, and middle class life. Freedom Riders, in demonstrating the lengths whites would go in order to maintain the racial status quo in a space as ordinary and transitory as a bus terminal, offered a clear image of the ferocity of Jim Crow and highlighted the potential for even more extreme violence as African Americans fought for comprehensive equality.

In the same issue as McDonald’s article, Lester Davis, an Illinois NAACP member, contributed an essay that suggested that the NAACP needed to embrace the

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.
militancy of organizations like SNCC and CORE. In the midst of sit-in movements, freedom rides, and boycotts, the NAACP had consistently provided legal council and leadership, but, as Davis argued, turned “a deaf ear to the demands from the membership for more internal democracy and a militant direct mass action program to implement legal victories.”

Davis discussed the recent history of the NAACP, pointing to the expulsion of Monroe, North Carolina chapter leader Robert F. Williams as a turning point. He highlighted the NAACP’s response to the Freedom Rides as a way of understanding how the organization lagged behind the civil rights vanguard. He quoted NAACP Chairman and Bishop Stephen Gill Spottswood as saying:

The dramatic exposure of segregation practices and of law enforcement procedures is useful in awakening a complacent public opinion among white and colored Americans, but to suggest that its function goes much beyond that is to confuse a signal flare with a barrage… we are too old in the ways of the long struggle that has engaged our fathers and forefathers not to realize that wars are won by using every available military resource and not by the employment of raiding parties.

For the NAACP to stay relevant to the civil rights movement, Davis argued, it needed not only to engage with more militant organizations, but become one. The NAACP was an essential part of the long Black freedom movement, but it was clear to Davis that the

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52 Robert F. Williams used his position in the Monroe NAACP to advocate self-defense against rampant racial violence. He believed that Blacks should not succumb to racial violence, but should instead show a willingness to fight back as a form of defense. In a few instances Williams succeeded by showing that whites were unlikely to attack armed Blacks. He was expelled from the NAACP and forced to leave the country. He lived in Cuba and China before returning to the United States in the late 1960s. See “Robert F. Williams, “Black Power,” and the Roots of the African American Freedom Struggle” by Timothy Tyson in Robert F. Williams, Negroses with Guns, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998); Tyson, Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).
53 Davis, “NAACP – A Leadership Dilemma.”
Association had fallen behind in the wave of civil rights activity. He argued that it “must change with the time or be destroyed by it.”

To Davis, the NAACP had a clear and simple choice to make. It could either change or stay the same. In changing, it would need to elect more young leaders, implement more militant and radical programs, and focus on fighting for all-encompassing equality in the South rather than gradual legal change that fostered slow implementation. An inherent component of the fight for comprehensive equality in the South was an analysis of the ways in which whites attained and amassed power. Davis wrote:

The entrenched wealth of the South will never agree to a change which must ultimately destroy the basic source of their wealth. Similarly, few leaders of any organization will readily agree to changes which can destroy their positions of power and influence. All change is radical, be it chemical, political, or social. No matter how gradual the prelude, there must come a point in which what was yesterday, is something else today.

In Davis’s assessment, the reason behind the slow pace of integration in the South was that whites maintained economic power by keeping a firm grip on their social and political supremacy. Their power to segregate social spaces and disenfranchise poor Blacks contributed to their ability to keep better jobs, acquire stronger education, and accumulate more wealth. Inequality did not start or stop with segregation in public spaces, but fighting to integrate them would go a long way toward more sweeping change. Davis’s analysis illustrates how economic concerns shaped the situations African Americans in the South confronted on a daily basis. By arguing that wealth equaled power and that whites controlled wealth, Davis explained racial politics in the South in a way that would not have been out of place during the Popular Front years.

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54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
Freedomways reached a wide range of individuals, from former Popular Front activists and New Dealers to young activists working from the grassroots in the South to international universities and organizations. As editor Jack O’Dell wrote to SNCC leader Diane Nash Bevels in 1967, “FREEDOMWAYS now has some circulation in 40 states as well as Mexico, Canada, the West Indies, and the leading universities in Africa.”

Among the magazine’s subscribers were SCLC leader Fred Shuttlesworth, Africanist scholar Basil Davidson, Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, the Reverend Jesse Jackson, and a range of college and university libraries. In 1964, CORE and Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) activist Michael Schwerner wrote a letter to Esther Cooper Jackson regarding a community center the organization was working to establish in Meridian, Mississippi. The community center included a library, and Schwerner requested ten free copies of Freedomways because “is so pertinent to the work that is being done here in the south.” By 1968, Freedomways had around 5,000 paid subscriptions. Some of its special issues, including one commemorating the life of Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois, sold around 15,000 copies.

Because Freedomways published a wide range of viewpoints, the journal inspired debate and faced ideological conflicts. Ralph Ellison declined to contribute in 1964.

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56 Jack H. O’Dell to Diane Nash Bevels, 8 February 1967, Jackson Papers, Box 8 Folder 6.
57 Michael Schwerner to Esther Cooper Jackson, 18 March 1964, James and Esther Cooper Jackson papers, Box 9 Folder 1. The Council of Federated Organizations was founded in 1961 by Mississippi activist Aaron Henry, and was revitalized by Bob Moses of SNCC, Tom Gaither of CORE, and Medgar Evers of the NAACP in 1962 to unite all of the groups working in Mississippi. See Dittmer, Local People, 118-119. Michael Schwerner was a white CORE activist and the director of CORE projects in six counties in Mississippi. Just three months after he wrote to Freedomways to request copies for the community center library, he became a part of one of the nation’s worst civil rights tragedies. Schwerner, along with James Chaney and Andrew Goodman, was driving from Oxford to Meridian in June, and the three were arrested outside of Philadelphia, Mississippi. The three were released and rearrested shortly thereafter, and were subsequently handed off to a mob. Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman disappeared and were lynched in Neshoba county around June 21, 1964. The FBI was slow to respond, but began searching for the missing workers along with other COFO volunteers. On August 4, the FBI recovered the bodies. See Dittmer, 246-283; Charles Payne, I’ve Got the Light of Freedom.
58 Nash & Leab, 236.
because of philosophical disagreements with its editors and contributors, and declared, “If I appeared in your journal it would constitute an act of opportunism on the part of both of us.” Virginia Durr clashed with Esther Cooper Jackson over the magazine’s inclusion of Black nationalist contributors and its nearly all-Black editorial board. At its inception, *Freedomways* emphasized the ideas, culture, and identity of African Americans. Though it published the work of whites, Latinos, and international contributors of all racial backgrounds, the editorial board was almost exclusively Black throughout its existence with the exception of John L. Devine, an art editor. As James Smethurst writes, “Esther Cooper Jackson and the board of the journal were generally much more open to the whole ideological spectrum of the Black Power movement…and adamantly insisted that African Americans run the journal.” This also created a conflict with one of the magazine’s regular contributors, white Communist Herbert Aptheker, who was intentionally excluded from the editorial board.

Virginia Foster Durr was an Alabama native who was raised in a wealthy household and deeply enmeshed in early twentieth century racial culture. When her family lost a significant portion of their fortune in the Great Depression and she was exposed to integration as a student at Wellesley College in Massachusetts, her social and political views began to change. She married Clifford Durr, an attorney who became involved in New Deal politics, and her views on race evolved further. The Durrs were active in the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, a Popular Front organization, and

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59 Ralph Ellison to John Henrik Clarke, 13 March 1964, Jackson Papers, Box 8 Folder 17.
61 Smethurst, 125.
were engaged in the civil rights movement as liberal integrationists. As the Black nationalism began to dominate the movement, Durr became increasingly frustrated at what she perceived as the rudeness and racism of civil rights activists. As the historian Patricia Sullivan writes, “[Durr] was sensitive to the depth of black grievances against whites, but her experiences in the movement had raised her expectations about the capacity of black Southerners to act upon the democratic ideal and create a political environment free from the stigma of race prejudice.”

Durr found the change in the civil rights movement jarring, and in 1966 wrote to Esther Cooper Jackson expressing her discontent. Durr and Cooper Jackson were not close friends, but were familiar with one another from their days with the SCHW and the SNYC. Cooper Jackson’s mother also knew Durr in Washington, DC. Durr wrote of her admiration for the elder Esther Cooper’s social circle, proclaiming, “I am sure no ladies ever were more ladies, had better manners or more social grades.” She then asked Cooper Jackson for advice. Referring to growing anti-white sentiment among young Black activists, she wrote:

So today when I run into the deliberate, planned, and really dreadful rudeness of some of the people in the “movement” I get a shock and also I get angry and resent it. People tell me I should simply overlook it as the hatred and contempt was always there and is just now coming out, but I think this seems very patronizing indeed. I never had to make any excuses for your mother and her friends, in fact I am sure that they would have felt these kinds of manners to be as inexcusable as I do… I don’t want to be provincial or simply “Southern” but I am simply flabbergasted by it. Do you have any advice?

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63 Virginia Durr to Esther Cooper Jackson, 5 December 1966, Jackson Papers, Box 9 Folder 15.
64 Ibid.
Cooper Jackson responded by sending issues of *Freedomways* with the intent that Durr might better understand the perspectives of the youth in the movement and the frustrations racism fostered. Durr subscribed and continued to write to Cooper Jackson.

In 1967, Durr replied to the issues of *Freedomways* Cooper Jackson sent her, expressing her interest and warning that she would not overlook any sign of a favorable approach to separatist tendencies in the magazine. She asked Cooper Jackson for advice again, this time using firmer and more frustrated language. She wrote:

> I still would like to know how to treat these outbursts of racial hatred that occur with increasing frequency, directed against “whitey”, The White Man, Whites etc. etc. I not only think it distracts people from the real problems of our society but is also self defeating as I do not think the Negro community can win its battles all alone, and without any white allies at all... I do not now intend to excuse it and forgive it and swallow it and say “Lo! The Poor Black Man, we must be kind and forgiving to him since he has suffered so,” and treat him like a retarded child.65

She continued, “So be prepared for battle if I find [this attitude] in *Freedomways*.“66

Durr’s frustration highlights the importance of generational change in the civil rights movement. Durr kept in touch with Cooper Jackson, providing her thoughts on the magazine’s articles and editorials, at times raising contentious points and reacting negatively to what she perceived as *Freedomways*’ Black nationalism. Cooper Jackson maintained her position that *Freedomways* should include a range of viewpoints and reflect the changes in the movement.

Yet, editor Shirley Graham Du Bois did not think the magazine went far enough in promoting Black Power, noting that the other editors were “so busy on ‘peaceful coexistence’ that they are wholly on the side of Martin Luther King.”67 *Freedomways* unquestionably provided more printed space to integrationist, nonviolent leaders. With

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65 Virginia Durr to Esther Cooper Jackson, 1 March 1967, Jackson papers, Box 8 Folder 16.
66 Ibid.
67 Horne, 223.
the exception of a poem published in 1966, *Freedomways* made little mention of Malcolm X. Though the magazine did not extensively cover his activity, several of its editors and contributors, including John Henrik Clarke, contributed to the founding of Malcolm’s Organization of Afro-American Unity.\(^{68}\) *Freedomways* also offered little coverage of the emergence and activity of the Black Panther Party, despite the organization’s prominence in the late 1960s Black freedom movement.\(^{69}\) Nonetheless, *Freedomways* continued to work to promote dialogue among various strains of the Black freedom movement. As Ian Rocksborough-Smith writes, “While it could not fully transcend the differences between militant nationalists and moderate civil rights leaders, *Freedomways*’ radical integrationism was most viable as part of a broader cultural front that still worked to challenge movement dichotomies through extensive coalition building.”\(^{70}\) One of the most significant spaces in which *Freedomways* built coalitions among politically disparate groups was in coverage of the literary and artistic expression of the Black Arts Movement.

*Freedomways* offered a number of Black artists, poets, and writers the opportunity to publish their work as the Black Arts Movement burgeoned in the 1960s. The Black Arts Movement emerged alongside other postwar artistic movements, including avant-garde theater and beat poetry. Through artistic expression, it “negotiated the ideological climate of the Cold War, decolonization, and the re-emergent civil rights

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\(^{68}\) Rocksborough-Smith, 66; 82.

\(^{69}\) Rocksborough-Smith, 53. The Black Panther Party was established in 1966 by Black Power advocates in Oakland, California. The Panthers based their philosophy on Mao Tse-tung’s *Little Red Book* and mobilized Maoist Marxism to advocate for “revolutionary nationalism.” The Panthers sold copies of the book and used the profits to finance the purchase of guns to protect local communities from the police. The organization created a “ten point program” that outlined the needs of Oakland area Blacks, including an end to police brutality and adequate access to necessities like food, housing, clothing, education, and an end to exploitation. See Joseph, *Waiting til the Midnight Hour*.

\(^{70}\) Rocksborough-Smith, 54.
movement, particularly the black student movement” and built the foundations for Black Studies programs. In this regard, Freedomways made significant contributions to Black nationalism, providing up-and-coming artists and writers with a forum to display their works. In embracing the literary scenes of Harlem, Chicago, and other American cities along with the work of artists in the decolonizing world, the magazine’s editors wove art and politics together, juxtaposing the work of liberal integrationists with nationalist artists and writers. Editors were determined that, as actress and contributor Ruby Dee wrote, “literature, poetry, drama, and music could contribute to liberation struggles.”

Freedomways featured works by Pulitzer Prizewinners Gwendolyn Brooks and Alice Walker, the art of Charles White, Romare Bearden, Tom Feelings, and Elizabeth Catlett, and the essays of a range of political and social figures, including international politicians and artists. The magazine’s New York circle was deeply involved in the city’s Black literary scene, and supported the work of the Harlem Writers Guild, Black artist and activist organization On Guard for Freedom, and Umbra, a poetry collective and literary magazine. Cooper Jackson and other Freedomways organizers attended readings and fundraised for Umbra, whose members included Tom Dent, Askia Touré, and George Coleman. Umbra embraced Freedomways as well. It is likely that Umbra’s connection with Freedomways and Esther Cooper Jackson facilitated the publication of some of the collective’s poets in her husband’s newspaper, The Worker, which “did not publish a lot of serious poetry at that time.”

Freedomways also featured the work of Harlem Renaissance writers, including Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, in an effort to remind “readers of the

71 Smethurst, 7.
73 Smethurst, 142-143.
distinguished heritage of a progressive black political art.”74 The magazine juxtaposed the work of young and old artists, offering its readers a sense of Black cultural history and emphasizing continuity and memory as important components of the Black freedom movement. Harlem Renaissance poet and playwright Arna Bontemps published a tribute to Langston Hughes in the magazine in 1968. Bontemps, who bore a physical resemblance to Hughes, recalled an incident where he was confused with Hughes and wrote, “I considered this my official welcome, under mistaken identity, into the Harlem literati.”75 By illustrating the generational continuity of Black cultural and literary expression, *Freedomways* used art to promote a political message that highlighted international solidarity and “[bridged] the divide between the civil rights mainstream and the more radical articulations of international black cultural autonomy.”76 Just as its editors, like Esther Cooper Jackson, brought Popular Front ideals to the new political context of the 1960s, the magazine’s artistic contributions offered readers an expression of radical Black cultural politics that could coexist with a message of integration.

A number of noted writers and artists contributed political tomes to the magazine, highlighting themes like gender as important components of cultural expression. In a 1966 essay on Black women and literature, author Sarah Wright argued that Black women “who in spite of economic enslavement in various forms…are both readers and writers.”77 Writer Alice Childress expressed a similar sentiment, linking the stereotypes of Black women in literature with the absence of major Black political and social figures in history classes, writing, “Have you seen us in any portrayal of the Civil War? *Gone*

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74 Smethurst, 127; 141.  
75 Cooper Jackson, *Freedomways Reader*, 322.  
76 Rocksborough-Smith, 98.  
77 Cooper Jackson, *Freedomways Reader*, 293.
*With the Wind* is not our story. And our history is not gone with the wind.” Referring to stereotypes of both noble and dysfunctional Black women, she wrote, “It seems a contradiction for a woman to be degraded…by popular opinion which was shaped and formed by [the] law, and yet also take her rightful place as the most heroic figure to emerge on the American scene, with more stamina than that shown by any pioneer.” But Childress expressed hope for the future of Black women in literature, arguing that activists who were invested in the Black freedom movement would offer truer representations, that as political change altered Black women’s social status, stereotypes would evaporate.  

African nationalism and Black internationalism were significant themes in *Freedomways* as well, and the editors used both art and political articles to express them. In 1962, jazz percussionist Max Roach contributed an especially poetic essay called, “Jazz.” Roach opened with the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* definition of jazz, and suggested that it overlooked the genre’s cultural roots. “Jazz,” Roach argued, “is an extension of the African chants and songs…an extension of the pain and suffering of those long, and too often, destinationless trips across the Atlantic Ocean, deep in the holes of those dark, damp, filthy, human slave ships…of the Black artist being relegated to practice his or her craft, even today, under these intolerable, too similar conditions.”  

Blues singer Abbey Lincoln wrote that Black female blues musicians “tell of a way of life, of the joy and pain of being Black in racist America. Her portrayals of life’s

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experiences are functional and act as ‘equipment for living.’” Articles on African American music highlighted the idea that Black cultural expression could not be divorced from a long history of racism and exploitation, and that the essence of particular art forms was uniquely rooted in an African American past.

Nationalism as a political ideology also found a home in the pages of *Freedomways*, in spite of the magazine’s lack of coverage of Malcolm X’s movement. In a special issue titled, *Harlem: A Community in Transition*, the magazine published articles by authors with opposite viewpoints on Black nationalism, reflecting Esther Cooper Jackson’s editorial view that multiple activist styles could contribute to a broad Black freedom movement. The Reverend Milton Galamison and Nigerian scholar E.U. Essien-Udom offered two points of view on nationalism as it related to the context of urban uprisings.

When rioting spilled from Harlem into the Brooklyn neighborhood of Bedford Stuyvesant in 1964, and the minister and community leader Reverend Milton Galamison offered an analysis of the strife. The Black population in Bedford Stuyvesant had mushroomed from 20 percent to 90 percent between 1930 and 1957, a result of suburbanization, white flight, and residential segregation. The neighborhood confronted dilemmas caused by white business owners, police officers, and landlords who were largely neighborhood outsiders. Galamison compared the situation in Bedford Stuyvesant to colonialism. He wrote:

> The hospital in which I am born, the apartment in which I live and the cemetery in which I am buried are owned and controlled by commuter circuit riders whose

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allegiance lies in another world which I cannot visit, not even in my dreams. The masters of my destiny are faceless foreigners who find my community a satisfactory place to make a living but not a very satisfactory place to live.\textsuperscript{82}

Though such a colonial situation had the potential to foster a sense of nationalism, Galamison did not see such a trend developing in Bedford Stuyvesant. A moderate, Galamison was highly critical of nationalist movements and condemned “existing Negro separationist movements as the biggest Uncle Tom movements in the country.”\textsuperscript{83} He went on to criticize Black nationalists in the north who concerned themselves with southern problems, citing their misdirected energy as a cause for strife in Brooklyn.\textsuperscript{84}

Offering a counterpoint to Galamison’s antinationalism, \textit{Harlem: A Community in Transition} included an essay by E.U. Essien-Udom, a Nigerian educator and scholar of African American nationalism. Essein-Udom underscored the importance of recognizing the variations among different types of nationalism and analyzed the historical development of nationalism as a political ideology. In so doing, he sought to dispel the myth of a “monolithic ‘angry’ black mass” of nationalists conspiring to undermine the government. Such a pattern of thinking, he argued, “obscribes issues and tends to divert public attention from the deplorable conditions of the masses of Negroes…[it] explains away the legitimate protest of the oppressed against an unjust social situation, and helps to mask the absence of long-term self-help and ‘uplifting’ programs for the social and cultural elevation of the masses of Negroes.”\textsuperscript{85} To counter this, Essein-Udom provided a history of African American cultural politics, highlighting nationalism as a form of

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 195. For more on Galamison, see Clarence Taylor, \textit{Knocking at Our Own Door: Milton A. Galamison and the Struggle to Integrate New York City Schools}, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 196.

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid.

community development in the face of oppression. He also drew comparisons between Harlem nationalism and African nationalism, arguing that “the liberation of Afro-Americans in Harlem…ultimately lies in understanding, appreciation, and assertion of his Afro-American and African cultural heritage.”

As a representation of Esther Cooper Jackson’s political development, Freedomways highlighted the potential for unity among activists and groups with different viewpoints, contributed to a vital surge in African American cultural expression, and carved out a political space that prioritized freedom of expression over the restrictions the Cold War placed on the press. Freedomways illustrated that Popular Front radicals were active contributors to the civil rights movement. The magazine toed the line stylistically between an academic and a popular journal, and as such it offered sophisticated political articles, art, and literature that would appeal to ivory tower elites and grassroots civil rights activists alike. As a Freedomways editor, Esther Cooper Jackson contributed to a “complicated matrix of political and cultural radicalism” that linked Black art, social movements, and politics.

The Worker, on the other hand, had a specific political affiliation and represented the goals of the Communist Party. As editor, James Jackson used the paper as a way to show Party support for civil rights, and the Party grappled with many of the changes in the Black freedom movement. The urban rebellions in the North, starting with Harlem in 1964, offered fertile ground for Communists to promote a class-based analysis of racial strife. Jackson’s basic analysis of the Harlem riots did not substantively differ from Freedomways, but his style, political perspective, and intended audience shaped his

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86 Ibid., 104.
articles in *The Worker*. He emphasized the contrast between Black youth, who were arrested, criminalized, and feared for lashing out against oppression while white youth ran wild and were merely labeled “juvenile delinquents.” He argued that both the police and the press treated Black youth far more harshly based solely on race. To Jackson, race and class could not be separated in CPUSA analysis, and he linked the concentration of poverty among urban African Americans to the racial context of the rebellion.

Jackson’s articles called for the criminal prosecution of the authorities perpetrating violence against Harlem residents. Echoing Galamison’s colonial analysis, Jackson argued that the police constituted an “invasion army of hundreds.” He asserted that Harlem needed services, autonomy, and political and social equity, not more police officers, as Republican Presidential candidate Barry Goldwater had suggested. He wrote that helping Harlem involved “a massive program in the areas of re-housing the ill-housed, mass education in skills for modern employment of the under-employed and the unemployed; it requires a development program for tens of thousands of new jobs inside and outside of the community through an influx of business and industrial establishments.” By advocating increased access to the benefits of capitalism in an exploited community, Jackson weighed theoretical race and class questions against the real-life needs of people living in Harlem.

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Jackson attempted to promote a pragmatic response to the problem, and while some of his analysis aligned with Galamison’s, Jackson was also sensitive to nationalism as a response. In drafting some of his analysis, he wrote, “Black nationalism is essentially a reaction to, a response to white nationalism.” His understanding of nationalism as a rational response, however, did not mean Jackson’s specific political views aligned with nationalists. Jackson believed, as he explained to one of his daughters in 1967, that the uprisings were “not the ‘revolution’ but they are smoke signals.” He argued that people in Detroit and Newark who rioted in 1967 had found that “there is an alternative to strangling to death in the slums of this land, it is to take from those who have it.” In a solidly class-based analysis, Jackson noted that a number of looters in many of the rebellions were white youth. Given this observation, Jackson appreciated Black nationalism as a realistic response to racial poverty, but his interpretation of the urban rebellions of the late 1960s was a solidly Communist one. Though Black nationalism was often a product of urban strife, Jackson saw clashes as struggles between poverty and affluence and used that to mobilize an argument for class unity.

When Northern uprisings and dissatisfaction with the slow pace of change in the South led to calls for Black Power throughout the nation, the CPUSA struggled with how to interpret and approach this new political development. The rising tide of nationalism and separatism produced a conundrum for Party leaders, who had gone to great lengths to modernize their stance on racial issues in 1959 by stepping back from separatism and removing the Black Belt thesis from their program. The Party rejected what it viewed as an outdated and unproductive political ideology for African Americans, but remained

91 James Jackson, notebook 2, Jackson papers, Box 11 Folder 1.
92 James Jackson to “Daughter,” 3 August 1967, Jackson Papers, Box 1 Folder 21.
convinced that the Black freedom movement was the best inroad for regaining political status in the United States.

Instead of summarily dismissing Black Power, Party leaders like James Jackson tried to articulate a position that both reflected CPUSA ideas favoring integration and provide support and understanding for urban Blacks whose nationalism was a product of inequitable social and political institutions. On September 4, 1966, James Jackson published an editorial titled, “Negro Unity and Negro-White Unity Are Needed for Freedom Power.” He argued that Black Power was a rational response to oppression, but that without the participation and support of whites, and particularly white labor, it would accomplish little. He wrote that Black Power was, “a struggle against all manifestations of racist indignities, for recognition and respect for the cultural, material and ethnic contribution which Negro Americans make to the national culture and history of the country.”\(^93\) In that regard, Jackson offered the Party a rationale for the new development in the Black freedom movement. Still, he argued, “It is necessary to win broad strata of the white masses to active participation in the struggle for the freedom rights of the Negro people.”\(^94\) Jackson and the Party worked to contribute to a growing discussion of Black Power by offering guidance and promoting a specifically Communist viewpoint.

In a 1966 pamphlet titled, “The Meaning of Black Power,” which was reprinted from an article in *Political Affairs*, Jackson provided a more extensive interpretation of the new political movement, which he targeted at Communist readers. He explained the origins of the concept of Black Power, along with its current usage. He wrote:

\(^{93}\) “Negro Unity and Negro-White Unity are Needed for Freedom Power,” 4 September 1966, Jackson Papers, Box 2 Folder 13.
\(^{94}\) Ibid.
There is a general agreement among Negro spokesmen today that the chant, “Black Power,” is reflective of a determination on the part of the Negro freedom movement to build up a maximum strength of united action in all situations in which Negroes are the preponderant number in total, to create local bases of political power and economic strength, and thereby transform their isolated ghettos into positions of influence, of “Black Power.”

Aware that Black Power was overtaking liberal integrationism as the advance guard of the Black freedom movement, Jackson attempted to square it with the CPUSA’s 1959 Resolution on the Negro Question. He argued that the Party had in fact articulated a Black Power position when it stated, “the struggle for the rights of the Negro people is not merely a ‘civil rights’ fight, it is a political struggle for the power to secure and safeguard the freedom of a people…for a just share of representation nationally; it is a struggle for majority rule in those localities where Negroes are the dominant people in the population.”

But Jackson and the Party were unable to reconcile their advocacy of integration and class unity with the separatism Black Power leaders advocated. In a 1966 New York Review of Books article titled “What We Want,” Stokely Carmichael outlined the reasons he advocated nationalism. He wrote, “Only black people can convey the revolutionary idea that black people are able to do things themselves. Only they can help create in the community an aroused and continuing black consciousness that will help provide the basis for political strength.” Carmichael developed that position further in his 1967 work with Charles Hamilton, Black Power: The Politics of Liberation. Carmichael and Hamilton outlined the term “institutional racism” in the work, arguing that the structural

96 Ibid., 9-10.
and systematic oppression of African Americans precluded full participation in national life. They argued, “Black people are not in a depressed condition because of some defect in their character. The colonial power structure clamped a boot of oppression on the neck of the black people and then, ironically, said ‘they are not ready for freedom.’”

Nationalism, Carmichael and Hamilton argued, was a natural response to a situation comparable to colonialism, and efforts at integration were futile in a context with such unbalanced racial power. Jackson, however, called Black leaders who promoted dogmatic Black nationalism as a response to white supremacy “poorly informed and demagogic,” and argued that Black Power should not be invoked as a nationalist response to racism.

Suggesting that such invocations led the press and the public to view the Black freedom movement in sensationalized and distorted ways, Jackson argued that Black Power needed to be understood and represented as a struggle for political, social, and economic equality. He believed that calls for self-defense were a reasonable response to oppressive violence and an important component of African American history, but they should not evolve into calls for Blacks to “organize their own policing system to counter the violence of racists and police.” Instead, he argued, while white police officers and the mainstream legal system had “committed ‘the deeds most foul,’” the federal government still had a responsibility for “securing the lives and property of Negroes, while protecting them in the full exercise of their constitutional rights to a non-segregated participating share in public affairs anywhere in this country.”

In Jackson and the CPUSA’s interpretation, Black Power offered a path to political authority where African Americans

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constituted a majority, but it should not be the sole force for Black freedom in the United States.

“The Meaning of Black Power” sheds light on the CPUSA’s struggle for relevance in the 1960s. Black Americans, Jackson argued, “are victimized by class exploitation,” and their struggle should “be viewed as a specialized part of the general class struggle of the jobless and working poor against the reign of the monopolists.”

To Jackson, socialism included Black Power, but did not disconnect Blacks from the rest of the nation in political structures or economic opportunity. He believed that socialism had the potential to connect an array of race- and class-based social movements and lead them to victory.

While the popular push of the Black freedom movement included an element of the Party’s earlier position on African American freedom, Communists, it seemed, were consistently unable to get the timing of their ideas about race right after the Popular Front years. In spite of their support for moderate and liberal organizations like the NAACP, and in spite of their commitment to supporting the rights of African Americans to construct their own mass movements without the interference of Communists, the CPUSA failed to make a tangible impact on the growing Black freedom movement. The CPUSA’s both real and perceived connection to the Soviet Union along with the FBI’s continued effort to connect the Party with a range of social movements led Black Freedom organizations of varying political positions to turn a cold shoulder.

Anticommunism remained an obstacle for the Party as it sought to promote racial justice, as well. Despite the fact that McCarthy’s widespread and arbitrary style of

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100 Ibid., 15.
anticommunism had faded, the CPUSA and The Worker still represented a fearful idea, and its newspaper came under anticommunist fire. The McCarran Act, passed in 1950, required all Communist Party members and affiliated groups to register as foreign agents with the federal government. While the government mobilized the Smith Act in the early 1950s to indict Party leaders, the McCarran Act was the subject of a decade-long judicial debate over its constitutionality. In 1961, the Supreme Court voted and upheld the act as constitutional, despite arguments that it violated the Fifth Amendment.102 The exposure that registering would bring, federal officials believed, was necessary because Communists had become adept at hiding their political affiliations. Eisenhower’s Attorney General Herbert Brownell wrote that Communists “no longer use membership cards or other written documents which will identify them for what they are.”103 Penalties for failure to register as foreign agents included a five-year prison sentence and fines of ten thousand dollars for each day it took Communists to register after the deadline. In early 1962, Jackson, along with other Worker publishers and supporters, were summoned before a grand jury for failure to register under the McCarran Act.

Jackson and The Worker anticipated the challenges of the McCarran Act in the early 1960s as other Communists had been summoned for failure to register. In an editorial in March of 1961, Jackson wrote that restricting the civil liberties of unpopular political organizations was “a challenge to every fighter for peace and democracy, for decency and progress, not just to Communists.” Jackson warned that limiting the freedom of Communists to espouse and advocate their political ideals limited the freedom

102 David Caute, The Great Fear: The Anticommmunist Purge under Truman and Eisenhower, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 564n. In 1965, the Supreme Court overturned the McCarran Act, agreeing that it did violate the Fifth Amendment.
103 Ellen Schrecker, Many are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America, (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1998), 141.
of all citizens in a democratic society. He ridiculed the Act in an editorial that ran on February 11, 1962 after he and other *Worker* employees were summoned. He wrote,

> Allegedly, the men and women connected with *The Worker* are being brought before the grand jury in order to establish a relationship between *The Worker* and the Communist Party…The relationship between *The Worker* and the Communist Party is no deep, dark mystery or secret affair. It is a proud relationship…Any telephone book will show that *The Worker* and the Communist Party occupy premises in the same building.

Jackson argued in a series of articles that the McCarran Act assault on *The Worker* was antithetical to a democratic society, which thrived on a free press. His editorials pointed to the conflict created by Cold War driven efforts to stifle the left while white supremacist assaults on racial democracy went unchecked.

Following this theme, Jackson linked the McCarran Act to the Black freedom movement, illustrating the connections between Cold War political culture and civil rights. Just as he and his wife had done during the 1950s, Jackson questioned the United States’ effort to promote itself as a beacon of democracy abroad while it condoned racism at home. The predicament that SNCC activists confronted in Albany, Georgia, struck a chord with Jackson and led him to draw parallels between his situation and theirs. Freedom riders traveled through Albany, Georgia in 1961 and ignited a wave of SNCC-organized protest in the area. The activists met with fierce local resistance, and the Kennedy administration made little effort to aid civil rights workers. “As long as Albany’s police chief Laurie Pritchett gave the public appearance of arresting Black protesters without excessive force,” Washington kept its distance. More than one thousand protesters were arrested in Albany, and any police brutality that occurred

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happened behind closed doors. The situation illustrated to Martin Luther King, Jr., who was arrested three times in Albany, the need for direct confrontations between activists and segregationists to ensure that the government would have to intervene.\textsuperscript{106}

After roughly 400 Black protestors were jailed in Albany, Georgia in 1962 for demonstrating solidarity with the Freedom Riders, Jackson published an editorial urging the federal government to act. He offered a stinging critique of Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy’s passive attitude toward civil rights struggles. He wrote:

\begin{quote}
The attorney general has found no words or means to uphold the lives and liberties of Albany, Georgia’s Negroes, the victims of mass police lynch terror. And this is the man who so blatantly has proclaimed his intention to enforce ‘as the law of the land’ the patently fascist and unconstitutional McCarran Law which would imprison the Communists.\textsuperscript{107}
\end{quote}

Jackson argued that the timing of the McCarran Act and the mass jailing of civil rights activists were not coincidental, but connected to one another. The First Amendment guaranteeing free speech and a free press, the Fourteenth Amendment guaranteeing equal protection under the law, and the Fifteenth Amendment guaranteeing the right to vote were intimately connected, and that an assault on one would threaten them all.

The Albany situation reverberated for Jackson at home, too. Harriet, the older Jackson daughter, had followed in her mother’s footsteps and was a student at Oberlin in 1962. She attended the World Youth Conference in Helsinki, Finland, that summer, and after traveling through Eastern Europe, proposed to her parents that she might stay abroad and postpone the completion of her studies to live in the Soviet Union. Jackson was proud that his daughter was enthusiastic and politically engaged, but believed her energy

\textsuperscript{107} “Fury in South vs. Negroes; Apathy in D.C. vs. Racists,” James E. Jackson, Jr., \textit{The View From Here}, 87-88.
was misdirected. He cited the civil rights movement as a reason for his daughter to return, and argued:

Morally, I don’t think it’s a good year for advanced thinking young people to LEAVE our country: have you not read of the mass heroism of the children of our people in Albany, Georgia during these weeks—where one out of every four teenagers, and one of every twenty Negroes in Albany have been jailed (many brutally beaten) in a great new stage that the de-segregation struggle has entered upon? Oberlin students, youth of the Nation and the world should be rallied to support these youth who are contributing their young bodies to the solution of a great problem of our time.\textsuperscript{108}

Jackson replied to his daughter that she would be expected to return to the United States to develop “the capability to give something, to render some service in exchange for what you would receive by living and studying in the Soviet Union, Cuba, or elsewhere.”\textsuperscript{109} Jackson argued that civil rights movement at home was intimately connected the Cold War, and that this context offered Harriet unique opportunities for political engagement in the United States.

As a Black Communist, Jackson believed that government efforts to undermine the CPUSA through the McCarran Act could easily extend to young Black activists fighting for civil rights. Because Southern politicians mobilized anticommunism to uphold segregation, the McCarran Act was yet another tool they could use to reign in civil rights activity. As the historian Ellen Schrecker writes, “Almost every [southern] state had its own little [House Un-American Activities Committee] clone or registration statute modeled on the 1950 McCarran Act. Several states even outlawed the NAACP…Southern investigators usually took on civil rights activists.”\textsuperscript{110} *Baltimore Afro-American*

\textsuperscript{108} James Jackson to Harriet Jackson, 4 August 1962, Jackson papers, Box 1 Folder 21.  
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{110} Schrecker, *Many Are The Crimes*, 393-394.
editor and *Freedomways* supporter George B. Murphy wrote a letter to another editor that connected Jackson’s predicament and the issue of race in the United States. He noted:

This is the first time that the U.S. government has acted in this manner in connection with an editor of a newspaper since 1837 when Elijah P. Lovejoy, was enjoined, as the editor of an Abolitionist newspaper...The fact that Mr. Jackson is a Negro (again proving that there is no area of American life where the Negro Question does not appear sooner or later as a matter of central importance) gives further significance to this case.\(^{111}\)

Murphy asserted that Jackson’s case was of special importance to the freedom of the Black press, in particular. His letter suggested a pattern of First Amendment violations when a free press threatened the racial status quo in the United States. As the editor of a mainstream Black newspaper, Murphy’s support of Jackson demonstrated that the issue of racial discrimination remained important, regardless of political affiliation.\(^{112}\)

The connection between the McCarran Act and southern judicial efforts to halt civil rights activism was not lost on young activists, either. One Freedom Rider who was jailed in Monroe, North Carolina, John C. Lowery, wrote to James Jackson about the similarities in their circumstances.\(^{113}\) When the Freedom Riders were leaving New York City, Jackson attempted to interview Lowery. Lowery wrote to Jackson that he, “was startled to learn you were from *The Worker*, but even more so to learn that you had been ‘thrown out’ of a C.O.R.E. press conference.” After being arrested in Monroe, Lowery expressed “my sympathy with your situation and the situation of your party” and apologized because “my own situation prohibits me from openly and vigorously fighting

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\(^{111}\) George Murphy to Carl, 5 February 1962, Jackson Papers, Box 8 Folder 45.

\(^{112}\) Ibid.

\(^{113}\) Lowery was a New Yorker from a wealthy family. When the Freedom Riders arrived in Monroe, they met former NAACP leader and self-defense advocate Robert F. Williams. Both Williams and the Freedom Riders hoped to prove the other’s philosophy to be ineffective. The Freedom Riders encountered substantial violence in Monroe and a number of them were arrested. See Timothy Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 264-279.
for our civil liberties.”

Though the McCarran Act threatened to bring yet another separation into the Jacksons’ lives, James Jackson managed to avoid jail as legal debates over the Act continued.

Given his position as editor of a newspaper under anticommunist fire, James Jackson vigorously condemned the Kennedy Administration. Unlike many Americans, Jackson saw little romance in the American version of Camelot, and instead saw an administration whose “ruthless energy in carrying out their commitments to Big Business against friend or foe is matched only by their lassitude, timidity, and cynical sleight-of-hand deceptiveness when it comes to honoring their constitutional obligation to...secure the 20 millions of Negro citizens their...equal civil rights.”

He noted that while Coretta Scott King reported that her husband was having trouble breathing in the four-man Albany jail cell that he shared with fifteen other jailed Blacks, Jackie Kennedy was “cavorting on skis churning-up a cooling ocean spray” in Hyannisport, Massachusetts.

But while Jackson remained critical of the Kennedys’ capitalism, aloof approach to civil rights, and affluent lifestyle, he held out hope that Kennedy had the potential to create the change he had promised during his campaign. Jackson’s editorials reflect his disappointment in Kennedy’s inability to handle a civil rights situation without compromising with racists like Albany’s Laurie Pritchett and Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett.

Jackson wrote to Kennedy regarding the Albany situation and received a

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114 John C. Lowery to James E. Jackson, 18 May 1962, Jackson papers, Box 8 Folder 23.
115 “Marshall Is in the Dock, but Kennedy Is on Trial,” James E. Jackson, Jr., The View From Here, 98.
116 Ibid.
117 Kennedy made a phone call to Coretta Scott King while her husband was in jail during his Presidential campaign. The move, though largely symbolic, endeared him to African Americans and liberals, who overwhelmingly gave him their vote. See Clayborne Carson, et. al, The Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader, (New York: Penguin Books, 1991).
118 For information on Meredith, see Carson, et. al, The Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader, 63. Barnett had extensive conversations with Kennedy about the turmoil in his state surrounding James Meredith’s
reply from Lee C. White, an assistant to the President’s Special Council. In an effort to placate Kennedy’s critics on the issue of civil rights, White wrote that the Kennedy Administration hoped that “the Negro citizens of Albany will have the opportunity to discuss with members of the City Commission the various issues which have given rise to the demonstrations that have occurred in Albany.”  

In response to the situation in Albany, Jackson wrote in an editorial that Kennedy “dons the garb of commander-in-chief when the reactionaries call him from Berlin or Southeast Asia, [but] speaks hesitatingly through the mouth of the Department of Justice attorneys when the rights of the Negro people are flouted.”

Jackson was frustrated that a president who had a theoretical and ideological commitment to equality was so hesitant to enact justice in the face of a crisis, but he nonetheless hoped that Kennedy would create change. By June 1963, Jackson praised Kennedy for an uncompromising speech addressing civil rights. Jackson wrote, “the president made an important stride toward the redemption of his neglected responsibility to give positive leadership to securing the rights of Negro American citizens.”

In spite of Kennedy’s shortcomings, his assassination on November 22, 1963 shook even his staunchest critics on the left. The next day, the Worker ran a set of articles under the banner headline, “DEFEND AMERICA! Punish the Assassins, Unite

enrollment at Ole Miss and attempted to use interposition to prevent the government from interfering in Mississippi’s rights. Two people were killed in Oxford, Mississippi before the Kennedy administration took action.

Lee C. White to James Jackson, 13 August 1962, Jackson papers, Box 4 Folder 23.


“Kennedy and the Segregation Crisis: An Editorial,” James E. Jackson, Jr., Jackson papers Box 2 folder 10. Kennedy declared that civil rights violations represented a “moral crisis” and proposed a civil rights act that would outlaw segregation in public spaces. He declared, “We cannot say to ten percent of the population that you can’t have that right, that your children can’t have the chance to develop whatever talents they have; that the only way that they are going to get their rights is to go into the streets and demonstrate. I think we owe them and we owe ourselves a better country than that.” “Civil Rights Message,” John F. Kennedy, June 11 1963, in Josh Gottheimer, ed., Ripples of Hope: Great American Civil Rights Speeches, (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 227-232.
for Democracy!” Jackson’s editorial argued that Kennedy’s assassination was “the long deliberated and planned-for deed of the fascist minded forces of the political ultra-Right and the Segregationists with their vested interests in maintaining the racist oppression of Negroes at any cost.” The “ultra-Right” encompassed organizations like White Citizens Councils and other segregationist groups, the Minutemen, an anticommunist paramilitary organization, and with the John Birch Society, a rightwing anticommunist organization.\footnote{122}{For a discussion of rightwing politics in the 1960s, see Rebecca Klatch, \textit{A Generation Divided: The New Left, the New Right, and the 1960s}, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Donald Critchlow, \textit{Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman’s Crusade}, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).} He urged Communists to “join with all patriotic citizens in pledging to redouble our work for the realization of all lofty democratic visions which President Kennedy articulated at various times.”\footnote{123}{“DEFEND AMERICA! Punish the Assassins, Unite for Democracy!” James E. Jackson, Jr., Jackson papers, Tamiment Library, box 2, folder 10.}

But Jackson’s calls for unity against the “ultra-Right” who, in his view, bore responsibility for the assassination, were met with similar calls for unity against Communism from the right. On December 16, 1963, the \textit{New York Times} printed a full-page ad from the John Birch Society that described John F. Kennedy’s alleged assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, as a Communist. About three weeks earlier, the right-wing John Birch Society had contributed to a similar advertisement in the \textit{Dallas Morning News} that “characterized the late President Kennedy as a Soviet stooge, ‘a Communist,’ a traitor to his country.” Jackson did not neglect to note the inconsistency of the Birch Society’s position in his editorials. He wrote, “Yesterday they dubbed Kennedy a communist, today they try to make Oswald a communist, but their real target remains the same—the
destruction of the people’s liberties on their way to a fascist society.” He noted that the allegation of Oswald’s Communism originated with former Representative Martin Dies, who once “described Shirley Temple when she was a child movie star as ‘a Communist.’”

Jackson connected the right wing to the perpetrators of racial terror and segregation. He noted, “THE TIME HAS COME, for the government and the people to sharpen vigilance against the brazen conspirators of the ultra-Right…the John Birch Society and the segregationists of the White Citizens Councils.” To the John Birch Society, “Communist” was a convenient term for its enemies, useful in mustering fear and contempt toward those it labeled as such, but to James Jackson, “Communist” was not a name to be thrown around like a schoolyard taunt. He defended it as a specific political ideology with a history, goals, and organization whose members had suffered for their ideals. His editorial assailed the Birch Society, calling its attempt to place blame for the Kennedy Assassination on Communists “a frenetic effort…to foster a [lie].”

Like Jackson’s effort to connect the assassination with reactionary rightwing forces, the CPUSA underscored the significance of Dallas, a Southern city, as the location. It was clear to Party leaders that Kennedy’s death in the South was connected to segregationists’ opposition to the President’s civil rights goals, and they likened the brutality and public nature of the assassination to a lynching. The Party asserted that the

125 Ibid.
126 Ibid.
127 Ibid.
assassination was, “the poison fruit of the brutal reign of terror which has enveloped the South, intimidating not only the Negro people but white democratic citizens as well, murdering not only Medgar Evers, but William Moore.”¹²⁸ In its statement, the Party affirmed its commitment to democratic causes and its opposition to segregation, and attempted to offer answers and analysis of the assassination that were politically compatible with its position.

*Freedomways* took a similar position on the Kennedy assassination, mourning the loss with the nation and offering a political analysis linking the assassination with racist lynch mobs. The editors wrote:

> In joining millions of our countrymen in mourning his death, we are not unaware of the climate of violence and barbarism which took his life, and the [lives] of many others in the south during 1963. William Moore, the Baltimore mailman, slain in Alabama; Medgar Evers, slain in Mississippi; the six children, slain in Birmingham, Alabama; and the President of the United States, slain in Dallas, Texas. It would be a tragic mistake for the people of our country to fail to recognize the pattern of reaction symbolized by these murders.¹²⁹

*Freedomways* also examined the murder of alleged assassin Lee Harvey Oswald, who was shot in the basement of the Dallas courthouse two days after Kennedy’s assassination. The editors again highlighted a pattern of “southern justice,” arguing that

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¹²⁸ “The People Will Fight Back,” CPUSA statement on Kennedy Assassination, Jackson papers, Tamiment Library, box 2, folder 10. William Moore was a white postal worker from Baltimore, Maryland who planned to walk from Chattanooga, Tennessee to Mississippi to protest segregation. He planned to deliver a letter to Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett asking him to “be gracious and give more than is immediately demanded of you.” He was gunned down in Alabama. Medgar Evers was a Mississippi NAACP leader and field secretary. He was active in the Black freedom movement in Mississippi after returning from World War II and was among the most influential leaders in the state. He was shot in his driveway on June 12, 1963 by Ku Klux Klan member Byron de la Beckwith. De la Beckwith was tried twice in 1964, and both times the result was a hung jury. In 1994, he was retried and convicted. See Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 748-749; Charles Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

¹²⁹ “Another Disgraceful Chapter,” *Freedomways Magazine*, Winter 1964. The six children slain in Birmingham refers to four young girls, Addie Mae Collins, 14; Denise McNair, 11; Carole Robertson, 14; and Cynthia Wesley, 14, who were killed when the 16th Street Baptist Church was bombed on September 15, 1963. In the aftermath, a wave of violence consumed Birmingham and two Eagle scouts shot two Black boys on a bicycle, one of whom was killed. Another Black Birmingham man was killed fleeing a confrontation with whites. See Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters*. 
the murder of Oswald, “fits an all too familiar pattern of southern police work…[and] found it more convenient to have the accused person dead, than to have him alive and given a fair trial as the Constitution provides.” In both the *Worker* and *Freedomways*, the Jacksons offered analyses of the Kennedy assassination that reflected their political ideologies, their commitment to civil rights, and their efforts to demonstrate that those on the political left wing embraced democratic ideals.

Through *Freedomways* and *The Worker*, James and Esther Cooper Jackson found individual niches that allowed them to remain engaged in the Black freedom movement after the McCarthy years. The couple negotiated new space as civil rights and Black Power changed the racial status quo in the United States. The successes of liberal civil rights proponents and the boldness of the new radicalism that emerged in the 1960s reshaped the possibilities for activism in the Black freedom movement. James and Esther Cooper Jackson used their editorial positions to remain relevant, maintain their ideological integrity, and provide exposure and analysis for the Black freedom movement. James Jackson contributed to his political party through his coverage of civil rights in *The Worker*. Esther Cooper Jackson worked to forge coalitions and represent the Black freedom movement’s many iterations. The couple spoke through their publications both as individuals and as members of a generation whose activism inspired and supported the civil rights movement. The Cold War had changed their lives and the Black freedom movement, but it did not change their passion for participation or their commitment to social justice. In the 1960s the Jacksons were newly able to work independently, adapt to changing times, and devote themselves to each other and to the struggle for equality and social justice.

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130 “Another Disgraceful Chapter.”
CONCLUSION
“The Glow From a Match”
James and Esther Cooper Jackson in Perspective

In the preface to his 1974 book, *Revolutionary Tracings*, James E. Jackson, Jr. wrote, “The glow from a match will not light a room, but it can serve to locate the light-switch.”¹ In this statement, Jackson also aptly described the contribution he and his wife made to the Black freedom movement. As individuals and as a couple, James and Esther Cooper Jackson built foundations, inspired other activists, and stood firmly and courageously behind their ideals. The couple helped to light a path to freedom, equality, and justice.

James and Esther Cooper Jackson were products of their generation: they were raised in talented-tenth families that expressed concern for the underprivileged and the poor; they came of age during the Great Depression and discovered that capitalism produced class strife and inequality; and the South taught them harsh lessons about the realities of Jim Crow. The Popular Front defined the couple’s political coming-of-age. Though they maintained their Communist ideals well beyond the Popular Front years, the couple’s politics evolved as they adapted to changing political times.

As Black activists, the Jacksons devoted themselves to the notion that U.S. democracy needed to extend to all citizens, and that segregation, job discrimination, racial violence, and political disfranchisement were antithetical to a democratic way of life. The couple chose activist outlets that fit their Communist and Popular Front political views, and made significant contributions to the Black freedom movement. As

Southern Negro Youth Congress leaders, the Jacksons sparked change in the South and offered models for activism that civil rights workers drew on in the years that followed. Activist Debbie Amis Bell grew up around SNYC members and later joined forces with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. She recalls, “When people say ‘snick,’ I always think first of the Southern Negro Youth Congress and Jim and Esther Jackson … Without that movement in the 1930s and 1940s, SNCC and the civil rights movement of the 1960s would not have been possible.”

Activist and scholar Angela Davis grew up in Birmingham during the SNYC years and echoed that sentiment, stating, “We have two… ‘SNICKS’ – a SNCC and a SNYC.” She was one of a handful of playmates Esther Cooper Jackson approved of for her daughter Harriet, and her mother, Sallye Bell Davis, was an SNYC member at Miles College. Between 1937 and 1946, James and Esther Cooper Jackson experienced what would be the defining political time in their lives as activists. The SNYC allowed the couple to see the results of their work, make real contributions to the Black freedom movement in the South, develop their political strategies and ideas about activism, and begin to build a life together.

In choosing Communism, James and Esther Cooper Jackson did not deal themselves an easy hand. Since the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, the United States sought to contain Communism at home and abroad, and the Jacksons placed themselves in the crossfire. As the Cold War took shape in the middle of the twentieth century, the United States’ relationship with the Soviet Union had repercussions for domestic social movements and activists. The Depression and the U.S.-Soviet alliance during World War

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4 World War II Letters.
II created space for activists on the left to simultaneously embrace socialist ideals and fight for democracy. For many of those individuals, the start of the Cold War turned their political lives topsy-turvy. A number disassociated themselves from their leftist pasts, but some, like the Jacksons, adhered to their political ideals and argued that holding an unpopular political opinion was a democratic right. The Jackson family faced tremendous political and personal consequences as a result of their decision to remain in the Communist fold while the nation grew increasingly hostile toward them.

Because the Cold War’s impact on the Jacksons was so thoroughly personal, the couple’s experiences offer a window into why and how the Black freedom movement changed. The choice to fight anticommunism, in some ways, distanced the Jacksons from the immediacy of the Black freedom movement. In other ways, however, their decision to promote racial equality from a Communist perspective kept the couple involved in the Black freedom movement. That the couple was not a part of the civil rights mainstream after the demise of the Popular Front did not mean that they were no longer a part of the larger struggle for racial equality. As the Jacksons got older and their individual and family needs changed, they were able to promote the movement from their own perspectives by offering reflections, interpretations, and forums for discussion. The Jacksons recognized that their contributions were individual components of a multifaceted struggle for racial justice in the United States, that debate was important, and that coalition building would create the unity needed for change.

The Jacksons’ life together illustrates the importance of understanding the consequences of political and diplomatic shifts on individuals and families as defining features of social movements. The Black freedom movement evolved alongside the
emergence of the Cold War, and as the Jacksons’ experiences show, changes in personal and family circumstances were a part of that shift. Leftist critique of capitalism and racism became less effective in the early Cold War years because many of its proponents faced profound personal consequences for their political beliefs. James and Esther Cooper Jackson understood how to be effective as activists based on the political context of the Popular Front era, but they also adapted to changing circumstances. When James Jackson was indicted in 1951 and vanished and his wife was left not only to fight her husband’s political repression but also to defend her daughters against infuriating and frightening FBI surveillance, the couple could no longer stand on the front lines of the Black freedom movement. Their experiences were emblematic of a shift in leftist activism across the nation. The political situation in the early Cold War drew radical Black activists away from the forefront of the Black freedom movement and to the front lines of another cause: their own political liberty.

Nonetheless, the Jacksons’ struggle against a political system that marginalized them as activists and threatened their family’s wellbeing did not prevent them from prioritizing the Black freedom movement. On the contrary, the couple believed that their political repression, family security, and democratic rights were woven into the broader goals of African American freedom struggle. Again and again, the couple found support and solidarity with Black activists across the political spectrum, and though many Black leaders and activists were ardently anticommunist, the Jacksons were connected to them in the fight against racial injustice. The Jacksons’ new roles in the 1960s were the product of their early Cold War predicament, but also the result of generational shifts in
the Black freedom movement. As a younger generation took over as the movement’s vanguard, older leftists took on new positions.

And although activists in the liberal civil rights years did not advocate for the same kind of economic change the Jacksons had during the heyday of the American Communist movement, the same economic issues, including job and housing discrimination, access to social services, and poverty remained central issues for civil rights activists. The Cold War did not reshape mainstream activism in a vacuum. The Cold War reshaped mainstream civil rights activism precisely because it had a profound impact on the lives of Black radicals. Exploring the connection between love and activism in relation to political and diplomatic change offers an important window into how and why the Black freedom movement evolved. James and Esther Cooper Jackson’s lives demonstrate the impact the Cold War had on social movements.

Esther Cooper Jackson continued to edit *Freedomways* until 1985, when the magazine folded. Over its twenty-five year existence, *Freedomways* reflected the many faces of the Black freedom movement, with an emphasis on art, literature, and political commentary. In providing a forum for up-and-coming artists and writers, Esther Cooper Jackson and *Freedomways* enriched U.S. literary culture while it reflected changing racial politics. A number of significant pieces were published in the magazine, including Martin Luther King, Jr.’s first speech against the Vietnam War, titled “A Time to Break Silence,” works by Jesse Jackson, writings on the intersections of race, gender, and science, poetry by Nikki Giovanni, June Jordan, and Audre Lord, and profiles of a number of the twentieth century’s most noteworthy Black leaders. The magazine also included left-leaning reviews of current academic works, including a review by Earl
Smith, a community organizer and professor, of Eugene Genovese’s *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, which he titled, “Roll, Apology, Roll!”

By 1985, the editors of *Freedomways* had poured endless time and energy into the journal. In one of its biggest accomplishments, the magazine gave a number of Black writers and artists vast exposure, and their popularity increased as a result. Many went on to publish much more extensively in mainstream periodicals. As Michael Nash and Daniel Leab have written, “African-American authors had many more and much better paying outlets for their work than had been available a generation earlier.” *Freedomways* did not keep up with changing publishing technology and in its effort to make the magazine affordable to a wide array of people with limited resources the magazine ran operating deficits. Fundraising only helped to a degree, and the magazine did not use extensive advertising. In the face of a changing publishing world, “*Freedomways* did not have the financial resources to make the transition to the much more expensive world of computerized publishing in the 1980s.” Nonetheless, in its twenty-five years, *Freedomways* influenced and reflected Black culture, civil rights, artistic movements, and academic study.

James Jackson continued to edit *The Worker* until 1969. In that time, he was the last American reporter to interview North Vietnamese Prime Minister Ho Chi Minh before he died. Later, he became International Affairs Secretary for the CPUSA. During that time, he traveled extensively and worked with the South African Communist Party and the African National Congress to promote the end of apartheid. Jackson also spent

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time as the director of the Party’s Political Bureau and as its Education Director. He advocated for peace and freedom, an end to nuclear proliferation, and for continued efforts for racial justice in the United States.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Jackson lectured extensively in the United States and abroad, teaching courses and speaking at a variety of colleges and universities. Topics included Black freedom, “On Brezhnev’s Visit to India and The Polish Crisis,” “The Correlation of Theory and Policy,” historical and dialectical materialism, “Morality and Revolution,” and his own past experiences. He earned a Master’s degree in Third World Studies from Goddard College and an honorary doctorate from Moscow University.

Jackson continued to be a force in the Party until 1991, when the Cold War ended and the CPUSA faced another moment of conflict as the Soviet Union collapsed. Party leaders again disagreed about how to best maintain a Communist Party in a changed political world. Jackson retired from the Party in the wake of the conflict at the age of seventy-seven.

On June 21, 1945, James Jackson had written a letter to his wife that would prove prophetic. He told her:

Dear darling, in these torrential days, with all of the demands they impose upon those of us who are conscientious in our sense of responsibility to our generation and that of children to come, nonetheless do not overburden yourself with too great a load of these “things that must be done.” Above all do not brood and “worry-worry” about them. Laugh; relax; sleep soundly; eat heartily; rest; exercise your body. This struggle is our way of life. We must not consume ourselves in a single crisis. The battle will be long, and we must be strong and healthy and happy in the fight in order to endure and win.7

James Jackson died on September 1, 2007 at the age of ninety-two, with his wife and daughters at his side. James and Esther Cooper Jackson had devoted their lives to

7 James Jackson to Esther Cooper, 21 June 1945, World War II letters, Jackson Papers, Tamiment Library, New York University, New York, NY.
fighting for a better world. Their love sustained them through their fight for racial
equality and social justice, and their activism enhanced their devotion to one another. The
couple understood that the pace of progress would not always be quick, and that their
individual and joint contributions were “the glow from a match.”
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