

From *Freedom* to *Freedomways*

Black Women Radicals and the Black Freedom Movement in the 1960s and 1970s

It is so strange to be going around doing “A Black Woman Speaks.” I feel as if magically I’ve gone backwards but without the same joyousness we had when first we organized the Sojourners. That’s really what is needed now. Some sense of oneness that of course we know is there. But experience weighs heavily on my attitude and remembrance of the viciousness of last time grounds me somehow. . . . I’m often down but never out.

—Beulah Richardson, 1976

Vicki Garvin’s conviction that the NNLC had lent “fuel and drive” to a new phase of the black freedom movement would be borne out in the ensuing decades. Garvin and the community of women that came together around *Freedom* and the NNLC witnessed the upsurge in black protest and radical resistance not from the sidelines but as key contributors to ongoing political struggles. In fact, many of the women who articulated a black feminist vision and helped to sustain a radical politics in a range of Communist Party–affiliated organizations during the height of the early Cold War would remain active well into the 1960s and 1970s. During these later years, they established new organizations, where they contributed their strategic insights and mentored a new generation of radical activists.

From the founding of the Negro Women’s Action Committee (NWAC) and sustaining *Freedomways* as an outlet for black radical thought and culture to their participation in the “Free Angela Davis” campaign and their advocacy of transnational solidarity, these women continued to make use of their varied political skills and lessons learned during the heated days of the Cold War. Moreover, much of this new activism resonated with the political investments and strategies that had shaped their earlier decades of organiz-

ing. Such continuity reflected the influence and legacy of Popular Front black radicalism well beyond the 1940s. In carrying out their work, black women radicals made a concerted effort to highlight these connections and to leave a record of their own contributions to the black freedom struggle for a new generation of activists.

For most of these women radicals, the shift from Cold War activism to the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s also marked major changes in their work and personal lives. The demise of black left institutional spaces such as the CRC, *Freedom* newspaper, and the NNLC forced many of the women to find new venues for employment, as well as activism. By 1957, both Vicki Garvin, of the NNLC, and Thelma Dale (Perkins), who had been on staff with the Progressive Party and took over as managing editor of *Freedom* during its final year, were working at Barney Josephson's *The Cookery* for extra pay. While Dale married Larry Perkins later that year and could rely on her husband's income, the recently divorced Garvin felt increased "psychological, social, and financial insecurity as a single woman."¹ For Garvin, the frustration lay not only in her limited job options but also in her inability to find work that spoke to her political interests and her desire to avoid the boredom of a conventional nine-to-five job. She continued to seek employment in a variety of mainstream office jobs and even briefly returned to school to study marketing at New York University.²

After *The Daily Compass* folded, in 1952, Marvel Cooke also faced employment difficulties. She relied on her husband for financial support until she found suitable paid work. In 1953, Cooke accepted a position with the Council of Arts, Sciences, and Professions, a progressive organization for politically active artists and writers. However, the organization soon succumbed to the financial pressures created by the ongoing anticommunist attacks. By 1960, Cooke left progressive work altogether for a job as a medical writer and receptionist for Sam Rosen, a politically progressive doctor married to Helen Rosen and a close friend of Paul and Eslanda Robeson.³ Yvonne Gregory would also struggle to find paid work within the left after 1956. By 1958, she had married her second husband, fellow activist Irwin Paderson, and was residing in Manhattan, working sporadically as a writer and proofreader largely outside the CP milieu.⁴ As these women's experiences attest, Cold War anticommunist pressures caused financial hardships not only for black left organizations but also for many of the black women activists who relied on such organizations for their paid work. In the late 1950s, as left institutions and organizations closed and these activist women continued to face government harassment, they found few employment

options that made use of their skills and education or fit with their political interests.

For a number of cultural artists, such as Lorraine Hansberry, Beulah Richardson (Beah Richards), and Alice Childress, the transition from black left organizations to more mainstream employment proved less turbulent. As they turned more fully to cultural work, many of these women found that the ties they had cultivated during the 1950s bore fruit in furthering their careers. Hansberry emerged as a prominent playwright and a national spokesperson for African American civil rights after her 1959 Broadway play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, garnered national acclaim for chronicling a black family's struggle with white supremacy. Alice Childress also found success in the late 1950s. In 1955, she earned an Obie award for the production of her play *Trouble in Mind*, which examined the stereotyping of black women actors. A year later, Independence Publishers issued *Like One of the Family: Conversations from a Domestic's Life*, a selection of Childress's "Conversations from Life" columns that had been originally published in *Freedom* newspaper. Throughout the 1970s, Childress continued to write plays and published several successful young adult novels. Beulah Richardson, taking the stage name Beah Richards, also gained steady employment in acting. After starring in Childress's off-Broadway production of *Trouble in Mind*, she served as an understudy to Claude McNeil in *A Raisin in the Sun* and toured with the show's national company. Richardson would go on to critical acclaim as a film actor in such productions as *The Miracle Worker* (1959) and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* (1967).⁵ Although each of these women undoubtedly faced career hurdles and encountered political constraints in their work, especially as they sought more mainstream exposure, in the 1960s and 1970s they all found some measure of success while still maintaining a political voice.

As these women radicals sought new employment paths and new sources of financial support, some also began to distance themselves from the CP. After 1957, a number of black women who had been active in the CP for most of their political lives moved away from the party. Vicki Garvin left the CP by 1958, troubled by what she viewed as its lack of support for black liberation struggles. According to historian Mark Solomon, Maude White Katz also "drifted away" from the party as she became increasingly frustrated by "the failure of some comrades to extend their political relations into personal friendships."⁶ Moreover, black women such as Marvel Cooke, who remained connected to the CP well into the 1980s, became less active and distanced themselves from the intense political debates and internal conflicts that consumed the party during this period.⁷ Cooke recalls being involved in few CP

activities after 1955. She became reengaged with CP-affiliated activism only in the early 1970s through her work with the Angela Davis Legal Defense Fund and as a volunteer with the National Council for American-Soviet friendship and the *New World Review*.⁸

Regardless of their official relationship with the CP and the limited employment opportunities available to them, most of these women retained both their radical politics and their ties to the community of black leftists they had worked alongside since the 1930s. In fact, many remained connected and active in common organizations and campaigns. This organizing work often trumped political affiliations and even strong ideological differences over strategic shifts within the international communist movement. The sustainability of these collaborations highlight the way in which the political bonds between these women were not wholly defined by the CP or ideological lines but reflected a common commitment to building a black freedom movement and shared experiences as black women activists. Such political investments and bonds were key to the continued activism of these women as they joined a new generation of activists in a variety of social justice movements that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s.

The NWAC and the Emerging Civil Rights Struggle

One of the earliest efforts by this community of women radicals to engage the emerging social movements of the 1960s was the formation of the Negro Women's Action Committee (NWAC), which included Maude White Katz, Vicki Garvin, Louise Thompson Patterson, and Shirley Graham Du Bois. As one of its first actions, the NWAC "participate[d] as an organization in picket lines at Woolworth's."⁹ These New York-based civil rights protests, organized by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), were in support of the wave of student sit-ins throughout the South that challenged the store's practice of "white only" lunch counters. The first picket lines went up on February 13, 1960, just weeks after a series of student-led sit-ins in the South, sparked by a February 1 protest in Greensboro, North Carolina, garnered national attention. Although it is unclear exactly which picket lines the NWAC participated in, the support protests went on for months and drew in many of their old allies. Representative Adam Clayton Powell Jr. joined the March 12 picket line in Harlem that included student activists from North Carolina A&T, in Greensboro, while most of the cast of Lorraine Hansberry's Broadway play *A Raisin in the Sun* joined a picket line in midtown Manhattan on June 15. The NWAC's participation in these protests reflected its members' commitment to "supporting our

youth in whatever form and manner possible” and the belief that such acts of resistance would “gain momentum” throughout the country.¹⁰

The group also looked to engage transnational politics as it sought to cultivate ties “with the women of Africa by preparing for a representative to their 1960 conference in Accra.” The ten-day Conference for Women of Africa and African Descent was scheduled to run from July 15 to July 25 in Ghana. An initial conference program outlined a series of discussions to address black women’s experiences across a broad range of areas; forums were titled “Economic Rights,” “Health Problems,” “Women in Public Life,” and “Educational Opportunities,” and another focused on strategies for establishing “a Closer Link between the Women of Africa and African Descent.”¹¹ NWAC members’ interest in sending a delegate to the conference reflected their transnational political vision, as well as Ghana’s stature as one of the first independent countries in sub-Saharan Africa and Kwame Nkrumah’s longstanding connections with the U.S. black left. It also built upon these women’s earlier initiatives and interactions with the continent. In 1958, Shirley Graham Du Bois and Eslanda Robeson had both traveled to Ghana to speak on behalf of their respective spouses, W. E. B. Du Bois and Paul Robeson, at the All African People’s Conference, hosted by Nkrumah.¹² In addition, since 1958, Louise Thompson Patterson had been a member of the Afro-American Committee for Gifts to Ghana, which drew together a number of left-leaning writers, including Langston Hughes and Aaron Douglas, with the goal of sending a collection of works by leading black writers and artists to Ghana.¹³ These earlier efforts clearly informed the NWAC’s interest in the 1960 conference. Shirley Graham Du Bois led the effort to send a NWAC delegate and traveled to Ghana to attend the conference, although it is unclear whether she did so as the NWAC representative.¹⁴

The range of activities taken up by NWAC bespoke the increasing optimism and opportunities these women discovered as the 1950s came to an end and their political investments appeared to find new life in the radical activism expanding around them. White Katz and Garvin’s “Statement of General Purpose” captured these feelings. They asserted that “as the cry for freedom rings the world our own hearts pound and our vision brightens.” Revealing their ties to an earlier decade of activism, Garvin and White Katz invoked the longstanding slogan of the National Negro Congress as they proclaimed their effort to attract “all Negro women who want to strike a death blow to jim crow [*sic*].” More specifically, Garvin and White Katz believed that the NWAC could “make concrete gains now in the arena of 1) political representation . . . 2) community life—more improved and inte-

grated schools, housing, medical facilities etc.” Yet, they also took heed of the difficult lessons they had learned over the years, particularly the price of political isolation, as they asserted that “our call is for unity, not rivalry, action, not silence” and advocated “submerging inconsequential differences and pre-occupations.” Seeking to rally the women of the NWAC to an organizational plan and structure in which they would build solidarity among black women at the “grass roots level,” Garvin and White Katz concluded by reminding members that their success would be “a victory for a living, dynamic democracy for all Americans and for the freedom-seeking people of Africa.”¹⁵ There is little record of the NWAC after the summer of 1960. However, the political agenda represented in the NWAC’s early actions and detailed in its “General Statement of Purpose” provides a clear outline of the types of activism that these black women would continue to undertake, both individually and collectively, in the ensuing decades.

From Freedom Newspaper to Freedomways Journal

As the NAWC came together in early 1960, another group of black radicals began to plan for a new publication aimed at providing a voice for the emerging political movements. *Freedomways* developed from an idea formulated by former *Freedom* editor Louis Burnham and by NNC activist Edward Strong in discussions with Esther Cooper Jackson. All three, along with their respective spouses, Dorothy Burnham, Augusta Strong, and James Jackson, had worked together in the Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC) during the late 1930s and been reunited in New York in the 1950s. In Cooper Jackson’s opinion, the journal’s origins rested in these bonds among “a group of friends.” Yet, *Freedomways* would not come to fruition until after Burnham and Strong had died, leaving Esther Cooper Jackson to serve as a founding and managing editor.¹⁶

At its height the journal provided an important platform for activists engaged in the black freedom movement of the 1960s and 1970s and a base for an older generation of black leftists, particularly many women who had worked so tirelessly to maintain a left resistance during the early Cold War period. As the historian Ian Rocksborough-Smith demonstrates, *Freedomways* served “as a bridge between several generations of black radicals” and “communicated and linked the experiences” of Popular Front black radicals “with a younger generation of activists, organizers, and writers.”¹⁷

From its early conception, *Freedomways* relied heavily on the community of New York black leftists that had coalesced around Paul Robeson’s *Free-*

dom and the Freedom Associates during the height of McCarthyism. The first year's masthead listed Shirley Graham Du Bois as editor, W. Alphaeus Hunton as associate editor, and Esther Cooper Jackson as managing editor; both Graham Du Bois and Hunton were former members of *Freedom's* editorial board. In addition, W. E. B. Du Bois, J. H. Odell, John Henrik Clark, Ruby Dee, Augusta Strong, and George Murphy Jr., who served as general manager of *Freedom* for most of its run, all served as editors or on the editorial advisory board. In building its foundation among this community, the journal also grounded itself in their particular brand of radical politics. This meant that the journal also espoused a clear black feminist politics that celebrated the political activism and cultural work of black women radicals.¹⁸

Such feminist politics reflected the experiences and vision of this older generation of women radicals. As they had for *Freedom*, these women served as staff, writers, and critical leaders for the journal and often highlighted the central contributions and analyses of black women. In addition to Cooper Jackson, Graham Du Bois, and Strong, who all held leadership positions, Maude White Katz, Louise Thompson Patterson, Alice Childress, and Beulah Richardson all contributed numerous articles, book reviews, and behind-the-scenes support to *Freedomways*. Even those women who were not directly involved in the journal's activities maintained ties with this community and regularly read the quarterly. Marvel Cooke, who briefly volunteered with *Freedomways*, remembered it as a journal that "I admired a lot" and that "approached the problems of black people all over the world in a manner that I felt was proper."¹⁹ In many ways, the journal served as an important point of connection for this community of black women, allowing them to continue to articulate a radical politics that centered black women's experiences and also build ties with new organizing efforts.

Published four times a year from 1961 to 1985, *Freedomways* enjoyed greater longevity than its predecessor, *Freedom*, but continued the newspaper's emphasis on supporting black radical politics, providing access for up-and-coming black artists and writers, and seeking to "unite and mobilize" those actively fighting for black liberation. The journal included writings by many leading figures in the black freedom struggle in the North and South, such as Martin Luther King Jr., Angela Davis, Fred L. Shuttlesworth, Gloria Richardson, and numerous members of the Student Nonviolent Coordination Committee (SNCC), which published its anti-Vietnam statement in the journal. *Freedomways* also published an astounding array of black writers and artists, from James Baldwin, Alice Walker, and Gwendolyn Brooks to Audre Lorde, Tom Feelings, and Max Roach, as well as

the perspectives of an impressive list of international activists and leaders, including Julius Nyerere, in Tanzania, and President Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana. Indeed, with a publication run of up to fifteen thousand copies per issue, the journal was accepted by a broad range of black political communities.

The inaugural issue of *Freedomways* reflected the Popular Front alliances its founding members had developed since the 1930s, as well as their efforts to build unity with an emerging generation of activists. This April issue included an essay by W. E. B. Du Bois, a key adviser to and supporter of the journal, and articles by its future associate editor John Henrik Clarke, who had been active in New York's black left since the 1930s, and by the artist Elizabeth Catlett Mora, who had served on staff at the NNC's *Congress View*. If these authors demonstrated the journal's connections to black Popular Front politics, the opening editorial sought to connect *Freedomways* to the emerging struggles to "do away with discrimination, segregation and to demand full citizenship" that had taken hold among African Americans. "We are born in a tremendous time of change," noted the editors as they presented the journal as "a vehicle of communication which will mirror developments in the diversified and many sided struggles of the Negro people" and as "a public forum for the review, examination, and debate of all problems confronting Negroes in the United States." In a tone similar to the one taken by NWAC, the editors also assured their readers that the journal had "no special interests to serve save those already clearly stated—no political, organizational or institutional ties."²⁰ Throughout the journal's run, *Freedomways* editors would seek, if not always successfully, to maintain this ambitious goal of addressing the many sides of the struggle for black liberation and of engaging a wide array of radical politics.²¹

From the journal's first year, its community of seasoned women radicals produced articles that documented black women's contributions to black liberation struggles and highlighted the importance of women's equality to the overall strength of the black freedom movement. Maude White Katz, who had a long history of radical activism since joining the Communist Party in the 1920s, served as a regular book reviewer for the journal and wrote several key articles for the journal. She published two significant essays focused on African American women's history in the journal's 1962 winter and summer issues. The first article, "She Who Would Be Free—Resistance," examined black women's experiences during slavery and their acts of resistance in the fight for freedom. The second article, "Negro Women and the Law," traced the impact of the legal structures of slavery on the current status of

black women in the U.S. legal system. White Katz drew on her own history of activism as evidence to support her arguments. She presented the Rosa Lee Ingram case as one clear example of black women's continued mistreatment under the U.S. justice system. She also invoked the numerous cases of police violence and assaults on black women in New York City.²² While both articles provided a historical context for understanding black women's contemporary experiences, White Katz also invoked the early postwar activism of women radicals to spotlight black women's contributions as fighters in the long struggle for black freedom. For example, a slightly revised version of Beulah Richardson's 1951 poem "A Black Woman Speaks" accompanied White Katz's article in the winter issue.

Black women radicals' allusions, in a number of *Freedomways* articles, to their years of groundbreaking activism coincided with more explicit efforts to connect their own history of resistance to the emerging political movements. These articles not only documented an important history of black radicalism but also provided critical examples for current struggles and organizing efforts. In the 1964 special issue on "the southern battle fronts," Augusta Strong's article, "Southern Youth's Proud Heritage," detailed the twelve years of political work carried out by the Southern Negro Youth Congress. Strong acknowledged the pressure of McCarthyism in hastening the closing of the SNYC, in 1949 but asserted that "what the movement began, the seed it planted did not fall on barren ground. What has happened since, in the last several years especially, is ample testimony."²³

Three years later, Strong wrote a more comprehensive article, "Negro Women in Freedom's Battles," that recounted black women's activism since slavery. Although Strong referenced only Claudia Jones by name, the essay explicitly celebrated the work of Popular Front black women radicals as a political community "of courage and conviction" that formed "another chapter in the freedom struggle." Strong defined Jones and "others, like her," as a generation of radicals "who rose from the ranks during the hunger years of the 1930s" and "developed local and national leadership" in "the newly-born CIO, in Harlem and in the Black ghettos of big cities fighting racism, police brutality and racial oppression in all areas of life."²⁴ Maude White Katz's 1979 article "Learning from History—The Ingram Case of the 1940s" also spoke directly to the activism carried out by these women as she recounted the work of the "Ingram Committee" and reprinted the petition to the United Nations written by W. E. B. Du Bois on behalf of Rosa Lee Ingram.²⁵ Although framed by White Katz as the work of the 1940s, much of the campaign to free the Ingram family occurred in the 1950s. While both Strong's

and White Katz's articles celebrated the radical past of the authors' and their black women allies, the essays also suggest that, even as these women underscored their leadership in the long black freedom struggle, they still felt some ambivalence about fully acknowledging their communist pasts in the pages of the journal.

The community of women radicals who had honed their politics in the 1930s and 1940s demonstrated little hesitation in engaging current political questions. Several women contributed important essays to *Freedomways* that addressed contemporary issues and organizing efforts. The winter 1966 issue reprinted the speeches given during a panel titled "Negro Women in American Literature" that was part of a three-day conference, "The Negro Writer's Vision of America," held at the New School for Social Research in New York City. The journal's reprints included the comments of the writers Sarah E. Wright, Paule Marshall, and Alice Childress and of the singer Abbey Lincoln. Reflecting a black feminist analysis developed through decades of cultural activism, Childress's presentation carried the most powerful critique of the depiction of black women in popular literature and media. Commenting during a year in which Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Moynihan issued the report *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, which defined black women as emasculating "matriarchs" of the black family, Childress challenged as "too easy" and "misleading" the growing assertion that the black woman's strength in surviving "has taken her femininity" and made her "the main culprit in any lack of expressed black manhood."²⁶ Drawing on her own investments in black women's history, she detailed the ways in which "the Negro woman has been *particularly* and deliberately oppressed, in slavery and up to and including the present moment." Childress argued that few works included this real history or other aspects of "the Negro woman's story." Urging black writers to engage the past, Childress concluded that "the Negro woman will attain her rightful place in American literature when those of us who care about truth, justice and a better life tell her story with full knowledge and appreciation of her constant, unrelenting struggle against racism and for human rights."²⁷

These women's analyses also appeared in several special issues of *Freedomways*. For the summer 1964 special issue, "The People of the Caribbean Area," the editors solicited an article from Claudia Jones titled "The Caribbean Community in Britain." Jones, a Trinidadian immigrant who would take center stage in Strong's 1967 article, was one of the highest-ranking black women in the Communist Party USA and had been deported to England in 1955 under the anticommunist McCarran Act. Jones's article examined

the history of black Caribbean life in Britain and reflected her developing activism and her leadership in the London community as editor of *The West Indian Gazette*.²⁸

Beulah Richardson also penned several articles for the winter 1964 special issue on the “southern battlefronts.” As she had for her assignments years earlier as a staff writer for *Freedom* reporting firsthand on events in the South such as the 1951 shooting of Walter Lee Irvin and Samuel Shepard in Groveland, Florida, Richardson traveled south to report on the ongoing political activism in Alabama, and in her home state of Mississippi.²⁹ Richardson’s three-part article recounted her experiences in Greenwood, Vicksburg, and Birmingham in 1963 during a period of major community mobilizations led by SNCC and the NAACP. Richardson detailed her thoughts while “participating as an observer” in organizing meetings and during direct-action protests. She reported on the violence of “white supremacists,” the continued harassment faced by protesters, and the humor and unity that drew young and old, men and women, to the movement.³⁰

Echoing a political outlook shaped by her work on the CRC’s *We Charge Genocide* publication, Richardson defined the struggle as a revolutionary “fight for human rights, not Negro rights or equal rights.” Still, Richardson had arrived in the South “hopeful, anxious, eager but unconvinced” by non-violent resistance. She left impressed by the “effect of non-violent struggle on its participants” and by the strength of the unity within these communities. Declaring these efforts the “beginning of a revolutionary struggle that will sweep the nation,” she contrasted them with her visit to Vicksburg, Mississippi, the hometown she had left long ago, where “no collective activity in pursuit of freedom helps the people transcend the miseries of a bleak, hard life.” Perhaps reflective of her own difficulties growing up, Richardson viewed activism in Vicksburg as stymied by unrelenting poverty and the “color cast . . . division among Negro citizens.” She did, however, witness some stirrings of resistance, which led her to conclude that “one sweet day” Vicksburg would “join the fight for Human rights.”³¹

In addition to contributing political and historical essays, these longtime activists proved valuable resources in other *Freedomways* efforts. Richardson, White Katz, Louise Thompson Patterson, and Augusta Strong all wrote numerous reviews, which helped the journal to maintain an impressive book review section that covered the latest publications on African and African American history, the black freedom struggle, and black culture. Prominent writers such as Alice Childress and Lorraine Hansberry contributed pieces to *Freedomways* retrospectives celebrating the political contributions of W.

E. B. Du Bois and of Paul and Eslanda Robeson.³² Moreover, as suggested by the special issues on Caribbean communities and the reprints from the panel “Negro Women in American Literature,” as well as the journal’s editorials in support of the “Free Angela Davis” campaign and on the Joan Little case (two of the most celebrated criminal defense campaigns of the period, to which many of these women contributed their leadership and organizing skills), black women radicals provided important strategic insights about and ties to on-the-ground organizing.

Maude White Katz and the Fight to “End Racism in Education”

As the political landscape changed during the 1960s, the political activism of these seasoned black radicals also shifted. As illustrated by their work in *Freedomways* and with the NWAC, they remained committed to the radical views that they had forged in the Popular Front and during the early Cold War period. Nonetheless, as they engaged new venues and organizing campaigns, their politics also took on the emphasis and tone of the period. Maude White Katz, who had spent much of her early life as a member of the CP fighting white supremacy in the trade unions and advocating for interracial cooperation, emerged in 1966 at the age of fifty-eight as a vocal activist in New York City’s struggles over public education. White Katz served as president of the Concerned League of Harlem (CHL); as a member of the Parent-Community Committee (PCC), a coalition of community-based organizations; and, most visibly, as chairman of the 1967 boycott of West Harlem’s P.S. 125.

As “the parent of two daughters attending public schools in New York,” White Katz, along with fellow CHL members, early in 1966 launched a campaign to open up exams for specialized high schools to more sixth-grade black and Puerto Rican students. Clearly foreshadowing White Katz’s calls in her 1968 *Freedomways* article to challenge the racist “education hierarchy” that denied students of color the same “quality and quantity” of guidance as white students, the fight proved a limited success as the Board of Education increased the number of African American and Puerto Rican students selected for the Hunter College High School exam.³³ With the formation of the PCC, in November 1966, White Katz became a part of the broader fight for improving public education in New York City. By the following year, White Katz and the PCC were embroiled in a tense battle with the local school board over community input in the administration of the merging of P.S. 125 and P.S. 36, including the community’s wish to have a voice in the hir-

ing of a new principal. Drawing support from an array of community members, including black and white parents, church leaders, and faculty and students at nearby Columbia University, on March 13, 1967, the PCC launched a nine-day boycott of P.S. 125.

The boycott proved an overwhelming success as almost 1,500 of the 1,850 students stayed away, with more than 1,000 students attending the alternative neighborhood “Liberation School.” The protest also won concessions from the Board of Education and garnered mainstream media coverage. A *New York Times* headline declared, “Boycott Keeps 1,450 Out of School in Harlem.” Illustrating the diverse cross-section of activists involved, the *New York Times* article included interviews with Maude White Katz as the boycott chairman; Sidney Jones, a staff member from the Congress of Racial Equality, as the boycotters’ spokesman; and Dr. Preston Wilcox, a professor at the Columbia School of Social Work and the principal of the “Liberation School.” The student population of P.S. 125 was 17 percent white, 55 percent black, and 28 percent Puerto Rican. Supporters argued that this diversity was reflected in the boycott, which represented a “democratic, multi-class and multi-race community effort” in the midst of growing racial and economic polarization around public education.³⁴ In May 1967, the PCC hoped to build on this success by running a slate of officers for the Parents’ Association with White Katz as its candidate for president. However, the May 2 Parents’ Association election produced a highly contested and politicized vote. During the election meeting, numerous new white members unexpectedly emerged to nominate Manuel Romero, a black man, as an opposition candidate to White Katz. As a result, White Katz suffered a surprising defeat. The ensuing turmoil embroiled the PCC and the Parents’ Association in an increasingly racially charged debate as several of White Katz supporter’s circulated a petition that decried the vote as “rigged” and argued the election was “taken over by white parents” as a backlash against black parents’ attempts to claim some power.³⁵ Such racially charged suspicions reflected the heated political climate of the period.

The work of the CHL and of the PCC emerged during a period of intense conflict in New York City public schools as a growing number of black and Puerto Rican parents began to challenge inequalities in the school system. The movement had been building since at least the 1950s. However, several key struggles had come to define this political fight as one that pitted black and brown parents against an intransigent Board of Education. These struggles included the 1958 “Harlem Nine” case, in which nine black parents refused to send their children to an inferior school in Harlem and were taken

to court by the Board of Education, and the February 3, 1964, protest, led by the Reverend Milton Galamison and Bayard Rustin, in which more than 450,000 students boycotted New York City public schools, demanding an end to segregation. Both moments paled in comparison to the defining force of the highly publicized 1967–1968 Ocean Hill-Brownsville conflict over “community control” in Brooklyn, which seemingly placed African American and Puerto Rican parents in heated conflict with the Board of Education and the majority-white United Federation of Teachers. These protests exposed the ways segregation and racial inequalities operated with impunity within the city’s education system. Emerging in the North during the growth of black power politics, these political struggles were entangled with debates about race, class, and culture, as well as with issues of segregation and racist practices.³⁶

Thus, it was in this context that Maude White Katz found a space to articulate a politics that boldly challenged the ways “Southern prejudices” shaped New York City schools to produce what amounts to the “planned retardation of nonwhites, beginning in kindergarten.”³⁷ White Katz outlined this analysis most explicitly in her contribution to the *Freedomways* 1968 special issue on the education crisis in New York City, titled “End Racism in Education: A Concerned Parent Speaks.” White Katz was one of only two women to contribute to this issue, which included articles by leaders in the fight for equality in education, including the former president of Lincoln University, Horace Mann Bond; the Reverend Milton A. Galamison, president of the City-Wide Committee for Integrated Schools; and Columbia University professor Preston Wilcox. Speaking, however, as a black parent and black woman, White Katz contributed an article that marked a bold pronouncement on the issue and that would be reprinted in the groundbreaking 1970 anthology *The Black Woman*, edited by Toni Cade.³⁸

The article defended the growing movement among parents of color for community control of schools and critiqued the longstanding discrimination faced by black students in the U.S. education system. Tracing the history of an education system created to “fulfill the needs of business and financial interests,” to defend the “Establishment,” and to regulate the competition for jobs and resources, White Katz presented a keen economic analysis. She also articulated aspects of the contemporary black power politics as she disparaged the “mere token” number of black teachers hired to teach a majority-black and -brown population and warned that “the union is at the service of the Establishment [*sic*] who does not want educated Black masses.” In addition, White Katz leveled a stinging critique at “Black teachers” and “Black

professionals” who “barter their heritage for a fee.” She viewed the problems in northern urban education as rooted in the intersections of racial and economic inequalities and located the key to creating change in the leadership of the black parent “who has nothing to lose but her poverty.”³⁹ Such political insights, while not reflective of a strict class analysis, did not stray far from the analysis White Katz had articulated in her sharp critiques of white supremacy as she fought to integrate the Needle Trade Unions in the 1930s and her support of Rosa Lee Ingram’s right to self-defense in the 1950s. Indeed, Maude White Katz’s politics revealed the ways many black women radicals continued to bridge the divides between integrationist ideals and black nationalist solidarities.

*Forging Transnational Solidarity:
Vicki Garvin’s International Travels*

As demonstrated by Louise Thompson Patterson’s leadership in the Afro-American Committee for Gifts to Ghana and the NWAC’s solidarity efforts, black women radicals who had faced Cold War harassment for their efforts to connect black liberation to a more expansive international politics found, in the 1970s, an encouraging environment in the renewed emphasis on transnational politics and Third World solidarity. The independence movements in Africa and Asia provided new opportunities for these women to engage their longstanding international politics. Shirley Graham Du Bois’s and Eslanda Robeson’s participation in the 1957 All African People’s Conference reflected some of these new options as the African continent, and Ghana more specifically, emerged as the center of pan-African activism. The African continent had long been deemed the imagined and historical homeland of black people born in the United States, but, as the struggle for African independence gathered victories, these new nations became crucial touchstones for black liberation movements.⁴⁰ Between 1955 and 1966, hundreds of African Americans relocated to decolonizing nations throughout Africa, particularly those countries, such as Ghana, Kenya, and Tanzania, whose leaders held strong diasporic ties. A number of black radicals joined in the exodus, hoping to put into practice their political theories and commitments regarding transnational solidarity.⁴¹

In the midst of these vibrant international exchanges, Vicki Garvin embarked on her own transnational journey, traveling first to Nigeria, then to Ghana, and finally living for nearly six years in China. Vicki Garvin made her initial decision to leave the United States after her close friend Thelma

Dale Perkins approached her with an offer of employment in the newly independent African nation of Nigeria. The job, working for a Nigerian businessman, was set up through Dale Perkins's uncle Dr. Frederick Patterson, the former president of Fisk University. Although ideally looking to follow other activists who had relocated to Ghana, which had a growing black expatriate community, Garvin accepted the opportunity to live and work in Lagos, Nigeria.⁴² It offered her "a breath of fresh air" both personally and politically, as well as an opportunity to actualize her commitment to pan-Africanism by "returning" to the African continent.⁴³

Vicki Garvin arrived in Lagos in May 1961, less than one year after the nation gained formal independence from Britain. She hoped that living in a newly independent Nigeria would, in her words, "reinforce my resolve and confidence in our ultimate victory." Garvin's optimism for the trip was also fueled by the enthusiasm of her new employer, a well-established Nigerian businessman and parliamentary official named Chief Ayo Rosiji. In negotiating the work contract, Chief Rosiji assured Garvin that she "will be received here [in Nigeria] with open arms." Perhaps knowingly playing to her own desires for belonging or simply reflecting the enthusiasm of the period, he reminded Garvin that "you are coming here to your true home and to your own people."⁴⁴

Garvin's desires for a rejuvenating homecoming were tempered by the political and gendered realities of daily life in Nigeria. Her brief journal entries, written sporadically during her initial month in the country, provide some insights into her struggles to adjust to the cultural and economic demands of life in Lagos. Garvin struggled to acclimate to disorganized work conditions as well as to the difficulties of being an "Amer[ican] woman living alone" and her consequent loneliness. She was also forced to negotiate the realities of neocolonialism as she noted "beggars, men with facial tribal marks, people lying and sleeping on streets (unemployed, homeless)" alongside "many modern bldings [*sic*] big Chase Man. Bank & other, Amer. [*sic*] oil companies, etc & remaining big British firms." Garvin's stay in Nigeria lasted two trying years.⁴⁵

Years later, in writing about her time in the country, Garvin succinctly noted, "2 years in Nigeria neocolonialism-disillusionment."⁴⁶ This shorthand can be read as her critique of the simmering internal political divisions and concessions to Western Cold War interests that would soon send Nigeria into civil war. However, it also speaks to the limited community and political opportunities Garvin found in what she had imagined as her "homeland." Garvin noted this point in her diary. "It is interesting (and significant

I think),” she wrote, “that I (& possibly other American Negroes) who feel while in the U.S. a kinship with brother-sister Africans experience some preliminary difficulty in assimilating.” During her time in Nigeria, Garvin had come to realize that, even with the “intellectual-political sympathy” between African American and African activists that she believed to be “theoretically true,” there was still “nothing automatic” about building such diasporic solidarity.⁴⁷ Throughout her stay in the country, Garvin struggled to not “remain aloof” from local culture, yet ironically found her strongest community among a number of African American women working with the U.S. State Department. In 1963, faced with the country’s unstable employment picture and growing political uncertainty, Garvin decided to head back to the United States after making a quick stopover in Accra, Ghana, to meet up with W. E. B. and Shirley Graham Du Bois, who had recently arrived in the city.

By this time, Ghana had emerged as the meeting site for black activists from throughout the Diaspora. Ghana’s leader, Kwame Nkrumah, broadly defined pan-African politics as unity among continental Africans, as well as solidarity with the struggles against racial discrimination faced by Africans throughout the Diaspora.⁴⁸ In this vein, unlike the Nigerian government, Nkrumah claimed a position of “positive neutrality” in the Cold War and argued that Ghana faced “neither East nor West but forward.”⁴⁹ The African nation’s central positioning in the African Diaspora was amplified for communist-affiliated African Americans by the growing number of black left expatriates, including the husband-and-wife tandems of Julian Mayfield and Ana Livia Cordero, William Alphaeus Hunton and Dorothy Hunton, and Shirley Graham Du Bois and W. E. B. Du Bois, who settled in Accra as Nkrumah’s invited guest.⁵⁰ Each of these activists maintained strong ties to New York’s black left, including members of the *Freedomways* collective and Harlem’s cultural left.

The possibility of reconnecting with allies from her New York community clearly fueled Garvin’s attraction to Ghana, and she soon decided to stay on in Accra. Garvin settled into sharing a house with two other single African American women, Alice Windom and Maya (Angelou) Make. All three women could be counted among the group of African American expatriates with a history of association with the U.S. black left. These activists, generally in their thirties and forties, became known in Ghana as the “politicals” of the Afro-American set—or, as one expatriate described them, “professional protestors.”⁵¹ Disquieted by the domestic Cold War and cautious about the liberal tendencies within the growing civil rights movement, they refused to retreat and instead turned to newly independent African nations as vital sites for

sustaining and internationalizing the black radical movement.⁵² As a result of these circumstances, they felt a profound loyalty to Nkrumah's project of African socialism and cheered his sharp critiques of U.S. foreign policy. Moreover, in contributing their skills and talents to Ghanaian development, these African American radicals sought to do their part to "hasten socialism and African unity," often by publicizing their own critiques of U.S. domestic and foreign policies and challenging visiting American officials at every turn.⁵³

In Africa, Garvin hoped "to be really useful, to represent the best of thinking Negro Americans." However, the gender and political dynamics of life in the new nation made it impossible for Garvin to find paid work that made use of her skills as a labor activist and organizer. Believing she "had no special skills to contribute to Ghana," Garvin could find employment only as an English teacher through the Foreign Language Institute.⁵⁴ Nonetheless, her claim to have "no special skills" rings false, given Garvin's past political and professional experiences and her activism in Ghana to strengthen the bonds of solidarity between nationalist struggles in Africa and black liberation organizing in the United States. One example of this activism was the August 1963 protest at the U.S. Embassy in Ghana. Building on her earlier support of student sit-ins, Garvin, alongside Alice Windom and W. Alphaeus Hunton, organized expatriates in Ghana to participate in a solidarity protest, picketing the embassy as the historic March on Washington occurred in the States. The demonstration criticized U.S. intervention in Vietnam and hostilities toward Cuba and included a declaration opposing racial discrimination that was addressed to President John F. Kennedy.⁵⁵ Such activism unnerved U.S. policymakers, who from the early years of decolonization had feared Africans' exposure to African Americans critical of U.S. racial policies.⁵⁶ The State Department placed these activities and activists under intense surveillance. However, this scrutiny did not prevent the protest from receiving extensive coverage in Ghana and in black radical publications in the United States.⁵⁷

Garvin, drawing on her extensive connections in radical communities, also worked to politicize the visits of a growing number of black activists seeking to experience for themselves one of the first independent black nations in Africa. The local community of black radicals served as a welcome center of sorts for newly arriving African Americans, from CP members such as James Jackson to artists such as Camille Billup and the playwright William Branch. Malcolm X, who arrived in Ghana in May 1964, became the most celebrated of these African American visitors. Pulling together an ad hoc committee that included Garvin, Alice Windom, Maya Make, Julian

Mayfield, Ava Livia Cordero, and several others, the expatriates organized a “refugee night” for people to meet and talk with Malcolm X. Vicki Garvin recalls of Malcolm’s visit that “Maya, Alice and I became his guardian three musketeers—mother hens who accompanied him to many affairs.”⁵⁸

Garvin, however, proved more than a “guardian.” As the historians Gerald Horne and Kevin Gaines have noted, Malcolm X’s visit to Ghana and his exchanges with black radicals broadened his ideas about coalitions and the importance of unity in the black liberation struggle.⁵⁹ Drawing on the contacts she had made through her work as an English teacher with staff at several foreign embassies, Garvin played an important role in facilitating Malcolm’s introductions to a range of international revolutionaries. She arranged meetings for Malcolm X with officials at the Algerian and Cuban embassies and with the Chinese ambassador, Huang Hua. She also served as the interpreter during Malcolm’s meeting with Algerian officials. For Malcolm, such conversations proved central to deepening his international perspective, and, for both Garvin and Malcolm X, these connections would influence their future transnational travels and alliances. Soon after these meetings, the Chinese ambassador, Hua, extended an invitation to Garvin to visit China, while Malcolm X’s meeting with Algerian officials would soon lead him to visit that nation.⁶⁰ Such conversations also seemed to mark an important exchange between Malcolm X and Garvin as she took every opportunity to share her political wisdom and to learn from the powerful young leader. Garvin’s admiration of Malcolm’s ability to take in other people’s insights may have reflected the nature of these exchanges, as she recalled that “he believed in listening to other people. He was not a know it all. I greatly appreciated that.”⁶¹

Garvin’s description of herself as one of the “guardian three musketeers” and “mother hens” when discussing her contributions to organizing Malcolm X’s visit also suggests how African American women radicals negotiated the complicated politics of gender and nation in Ghana.⁶² On one hand, such a statement can be read as downplaying her role by embracing a more acceptable gendered and apolitical construct to define her political work. A concession to a limiting gender politics, enmeshed in the activism of this community of expatriates, which reinforced male dominance and shaped many of the diasporic networks. The African American activist Sylvie Boone angrily addressed this politics, contending that in Ghana it was “fixed so that there is no meaningful way for an Afro woman to participate.”⁶³ On the other hand, such framing could also define a real and important mentoring relationship with Malcolm X. In this context, Garvin’s use of the term “mother hens”

most likely reflected an effort to mark her role as a knowledgeable elder (a role long gendered male) within the black liberation movement. As a veteran activist who had survived the earlier onslaught of government harassment, Garvin embraced her role as a valuable resource to a younger generation. She openly shared her experiences and insights, mentoring younger activists just as she had been mentored, even as the shifting political landscape and gender politics complicated these intergenerational exchanges.

Kwame Nkrumah's efforts at building African socialism and pan-African unity in Ghana ended on February 24, 1966, as a military coup ousted him from power. Many African American radicals who had found hope in Nkrumah's political rule experienced the coup as an opportunity lost that forced them to question their own place in the struggle.⁶⁴ "Nothing seems possible to me," moaned Alice Windom following the coup, adding that "all the purpose has gone out of being in Africa now that it has turned into a bloody minstrel show, but I can't yet face going back to the States."⁶⁵ Still, many had seen the impending crisis developing as internal conflicts intensified in 1962 and Nkrumah increasingly feared assassination. Vicki Garvin joined those who read the writing on the wall and left Ghana before the coup occurred. But, like Windom, she could not bear to return home. As she chose to continue to live outside the United States, Garvin turned her hopes eastward. In 1964, she moved to China accepting an offer from the Chinese ambassador to work as an English-language teacher in Shanghai and later as a "polisher" in Beijing for the English-language translation of the *Peking Weekly Review*.⁶⁶

Garvin would arrive in the People's Republic of China alone and not knowing the language, but she would not remain isolated for long. In traveling to China, Garvin joined with a number of African American radicals who sought to develop ties with the communist nation. Shirley Graham Du Bois would continue to build her connections to China, traveling there frequently, although she remained based on the African continent. In addition, Robert F. Williams, the black radical from North Carolina who was forced into exile for advocating armed self-defense, and his wife Mabel Williams also found a new home in China in 1965. Garvin, Graham Du Bois, and the Williamses had all been connected to New York's black left. Garvin had counted Graham Du Bois as a friend and ally since the early 1950s and it's more than likely that she had met Robert Williams almost a decade earlier when he contributed several articles to *Freedom* newspaper.⁶⁷ In China, Shirley Graham Du Bois and Robert Williams carried added clout as popular figures in the black freedom struggle, and the Chinese government welcomed them as key dignitar-

ies. Garvin's reputation in China as a revolutionary and behind-the-scenes strategist did not garner her the same lavish treatment and accommodation afforded Graham Du Bois and Williams. However, all three activists contributed to solidifying China's standing as a committed supporter of black liberation as reflected in Mao Zedong's 1963 statement in support of the civil rights movement. In turn, China provided these black radicals with a base from which to continue to act on their international vision and communist politics, as well as a significant connection to the emerging U.S. black power movements that advocated Third World solidarity and a revolutionary nationalist vision inspired by the Chinese Revolution and the writings of Mao.⁶⁸

While in Shanghai, Garvin honed her skills as a teacher working at the Shanghai Institute of Foreign Languages, teaching advanced classes in English and establishing her own course on African American history. By 1966, as the Chinese Cultural Revolution brought the closing of schools, Garvin found herself out of a job and one of the few foreigners still residing in Shanghai's Peace Hotel. After meeting and marrying Leibel Bergman, a fellow American living in Beijing, Garvin relocated to the bustling capital city to work for the *Peking Weekly Review*. It is here that Garvin built a lasting relationship with Robert and Mabel Williams and with Gerald (Gerry) Tannenbaum. In Beijing, they became "close friends and allies" as part of the small community of Americans who remained in China through the start of the Cultural Revolution. During these years, they "shared countless hours recounting the history of the revolutionary struggle" as together they watched, analyzed, and debated the social and political upheavals occurring in China and the United States in the late 1960s.⁶⁹

In all, Garvin spent six years in the People's Republic. Garvin rarely spoke in detail about the turbulence she must have witnessed during her stay in China. Instead, she credited her time there with teaching her much about "the working of imperialism, neo-colonialism and socialism," and she remained a staunch supporter of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) for the rest of her life, even returning to the country in the late 1970s.⁷⁰ Her support of China was strengthened, in part, by a number of lasting connections and friendships she developed while there, particularly with the Shanghai Institute and with several of her former students. In fact, one of Garvin's most powerful experiences in China was the invitation she received from her students to return to the Shanghai Institute of Foreign Language in 1968 to address a pre-rally meeting in celebration of Chairman Mao's second statement on the black liberation movement, "In Support of the Afro-American Struggle against Violent Repression," issued after the assassination of Martin

Luther King, Jr. Recounting the experience, Garvin remembers it as a “privilege” and a moment of overwhelming support that moved her to tears.⁷¹ Such experiences led Garvin to continue to view China and the CCP as “a valuable resource for exploited and oppressed peoples everywhere who have so much in common.”⁷² Garvin’s embrace of China reflected not only her continued investments in communism and black liberation but also a broad vision of transnational solidarity that led her to frame herself as “a pan-Africanist” and “a proletarian, working class, internationalist.”⁷³

Black Women’s Liberation and the “Law, Again”

Upon returning to the United States, Garvin encountered a markedly changed country and political scene. Nonetheless, she must have found some of the political changes quite welcoming. With the emergence of a transnational black liberation movement, a growing feminist politics, and the New Left, Garvin’s credentials as a longtime black radical and Third World internationalist resonated within the political milieu taking shape in the 1970s. In fact, the community of black women leftists who had defiantly sustained their radical politics during the early Cold War found the 1970s a surprisingly welcoming political environment. In particular, their radical vision, with its critique of white supremacy, gender inequalities, and U.S. imperialism, meshed well with the ideas emerging in black power politics, women’s liberation, and the newly formed Marxist-Leninist and Maoist-based communist organizations.

Drawing on skills and strategies honed in their years of organizing with the Civil Rights Congress and their leadership in the campaign to free Rosa Lee Ingram, these women found common ground with new political communities and played key roles in two of the most celebrated legal defense campaigns to emerge in the United States in the 1970s, the campaign to free Angela Davis and the Joan Little case. The “Free Angela Davis” campaign centered on Davis, a young black woman activist and scholar, who was a member of the CP and its Los Angeles–based all-black collective, the Che-Lumumba Club. She was fighting the University of California Regents’ efforts to remove her from her position as an assistant professor at the University of California-Los Angeles (UCLA), under a 1940s resolution prohibiting the employment of CP members. A supporter of the Black Panther Party, Davis also worked on a defense campaign for the Soledad Brothers, three black inmates at Soledad Prison who had been accused of murdering a white guard.

On August 7, 1970, in the midst of these political battles, Jonathan Jackson led a failed prison break at the Marin County courthouse. The deadly effort left Jackson, the brother of Soledad inmate George Jackson, as well as prisoners John McClain and William Christmas and Judge Harold Haley, dead. Linking Davis to the incident through her ties to George Jackson and the Soledad Brothers, investigators accused her of supplying the weapons for the attack. Facing charges of kidnapping, murder, and conspiracy, Davis immediately went into hiding. Davis was placed on the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Ten Most Wanted list and became the focus of an all-out police search until her arrest, in New York, in October 1970.⁷⁴

Angela Davis's experiences, from her resistance to the anticommunist attacks aimed at her, to her commitment to fighting for black liberation from within the CP, must have felt quite familiar to many of the older black women radicals aware of her case.⁷⁵ As Davis went underground, many of these women, still affiliated with the CP, immediately mobilized support for her case and provided crucial organizational leadership. Forming the National United Committee to Free Angela Davis (NUCFAD), the CP led a highly successful national and international campaign to publicize the government's harsh treatment and faulty prosecution of Angela Davis. Louise Thompson Patterson and Esther Cooper Jackson both served on the New York Committee to Free Angela Davis, which Patterson chaired. Leading speaking tours, organizing fundraisers, and coordinating publicity efforts, under Thompson Patterson's direction the New York Committee worked diligently to mobilize party resources and to build broader coalitions based on her connections.⁷⁶ Many in New York's black left joined the campaign. *Freedomways* issued an editorial urging readers to support Angela Davis, and many of the journal's contributors lent their voices to the cause, including Nikki Giovanni, Ossie Davis, and James Baldwin, who penned a public statement in support of Davis that was published in the *New York Review of Books*.⁷⁷ Patterson also reached out to younger black women radicals, including Fran Beal and the members of the Third World Women's Alliance, which helped to organize an "Angela Davis Day" rally in New York's Central Park in September 1971.⁷⁸ As Davis's case moved toward trial, the CP formed the Angela Davis Legal Defense Fund. William Patterson personally asked Marvel Cooke to serve as national secretary alongside Ossie Davis as chairman. In charge of coordinating activities on both coasts and fundraising, Cooke helped to organize a major rally at Madison Square Garden. The fundraising event was scheduled for June 1972, but, after Davis's acquittal of all charges on June 4, the event became a victory celebration, with Angela Davis as the guest of honor.

“An Evening with Angela Davis,” with Ossie Davis as the master of ceremonies and performances by Nina Simone, Carmen McCrae, and Chita Rivera, proved a great success, drawing more than fifteen thousand supporters and raising close to two hundred thousand dollars.⁷⁹ Such success in a campaign centered on a black woman radical must have been particularly inspiring for the black women who had worked so diligently in the CRC and in support of activists prosecuted under the Smith Act.

The public campaign in support of Angela Davis did not come without some backlash, but it did reflect a shifting tide in the political landscape and a growing suspicion of the U.S. criminal justice system. This change in public consciousness concerning the criminal justice system and the increased awareness of the specific struggles of black women in the United States would also shape the 1974–1975 Joan (pronounced Jo Ann) Little case. Little, a poor black woman imprisoned in North Carolina for robbery, became a celebrated figure in the black liberation and feminist movements when, in August 1974, she killed her white jailer, Clarence Alligood, in an act of self-defense in Beauford County, North Carolina, and then escaped. Although initial reports included none of these details, Alligood was discovered in Little’s cell with his pants down, dead from numerous stab wounds made with an ice pick. After eluding an eight-day statewide search, Little turned herself in with the support of legal counsel. Joan Little contended that Alligood had instigated the incident by entering her cell and sexually assaulting her. This set the stage for what many viewed as an important legal and political test case for women’s rights and black self-defense.⁸⁰

The case drew together a broad range of activists, from feminist and black power advocates to local community groups, in a powerful “Free Joan Little” movement. It also attracted black women radicals such as Velma Hopkins, a longtime church activist who had entered radical politics through her work as a union organizer with the Food, Tobacco, and Allied Workers and the NNLC in the 1940s and 1950s.⁸¹ Hopkins, alongside Viola Brown, had also served as a regional sponsor of the National Committee to Free the Ingram Family and been active in Winston-Salem’s People’s Defense Committee, which, in 1954, organized a delegation to protest Rosa Lee Ingram’s conviction.⁸² As a founding member of the Concerned Women for Fairness to Joan Little (later the Concerned Women for Justice), a statewide church-based civil rights organization, Hopkins drew on this past experience to provide key local leadership in the campaign to free Joan Little.⁸³

The “Free Joan Little” movement also attracted a number of black women who had been active in the “Free Angela Davis” campaign,

including CP member Charlene Mitchell, who served as head of the National Alliance against Racism and Political Oppression, and Angela Davis, who launched a powerful defense of Little in the article “Joanne Little—The Dialectics of Rape,” published in *MS.* magazine in 1975 and who spoke often in support of Little.⁸⁴ Indeed, the “Free Joan Little” movement had an expansive reach, drawing in white and black feminists and civil rights activists, as well as black nationalist organizations such as the Black Women’s United Front, and producing a wave of poetry, songs, and creative protests.⁸⁵

The Little case emphasized black women’s experiences of racialized sexual violence. The calls for supporting a woman’s right to defend herself against such attacks struck a deep chord in black women activists seeking to make visible the intersecting forces of race, class, and gender, including members of the Third World Women’s Alliance and the National Black Feminist Organization.⁸⁶ The “Free Joan Little” movement also shared common cause with the politics articulated by women radicals who had organized in defense of black womanhood during the 1950s and who had supported black women’s longstanding struggles for control over their own bodies. In many ways, the Little case resembled the earlier Rosa Lee Ingram campaign; a broad spectrum of black women mobilized in support of Little, who, like Ingram, was a poor black southern woman facing murder charges and possible execution for having defended herself against the assault of a white man. In the context of the post-1960s civil rights movement and a burgeoning feminist politics, the case would test whether these claims held greater sway in the legal system and mainstream public opinion. *Freedomways* editors, perhaps looking back to the Ingram campaign, declared as much, asserting that, “as the court convenes on this issue, it is not Joanne Little who is on trial . . . it is the system of American justice, itself.” Defining the “political issue” as one based on the race and gender of Joan Little and Clarence Alligood, the editors warned that “the conviction of Joanne Little would be a victory for racism and male supremacy.”⁸⁷ On August 15, 1975, an interracial jury rendered its verdict. Joan Little, with the aid of a politically attuned and locally based legal team and an international public campaign, was acquitted of all charges.⁸⁸

This successful organizing in support of Angela Davis and Joan Little, two young black women seeking to defend themselves within the U.S. criminal justice system, represented only one aspect of the common ground and political openings these veteran women activists found in the radical movements of the 1970s. Another notable connection emerged as a new genera-

tion of activists, influenced by an increasingly brutal U.S. war in Vietnam, the examples of indigenous socialist revolutions in China, Cuba, and African nations such as Tanzania, and the political vision of an older generation of black radicals, turned more fully toward challenging U.S. imperialism and advocating transnational solidarity.⁸⁹

International Solidarity and the Old Left

In the radicalized political environment of the 1970s, challenges to U.S. imperialism often coincided with an explicit support of international communist and revolutionary movements. Many women radicals viewed such renewed interests in international solidarity as a way to reconnect with and help expand U.S.-based transnational peace and socialist solidarity organizing. Veteran black women radicals engaged these efforts through several left-leaning organizations, including the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship (NCASF), the longstanding journal the *New World Review*, and the U.S.-China Peoples Friendship Association (USCPFA) and its journal, *New China*.

The NCASF, under the leadership of the Reverend Richard Morford, who served as executive director from 1946 to 1981, worked to strengthen bonds between the people of the United States and those of the Soviet Union through educational programs and cultural exchanges and a particular investment in organizing U.S. “goodwill delegations” to the Soviet Union. The *New World Review*, founded in 1951 as the successor journal to *Soviet Russia Today*, allied closely with the NCASF to promote U.S.-Soviet solidarity, as they shared adjacent offices on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan. The journal, however, also viewed its mission as promoting solidarity with socialist nations by advocating in the United States for a “closer understanding and friendship with the U.S.S.R. and other socialist countries.”⁹⁰ Founded in 1974, the U.S.-China Association, under the acronym USCPFA, embraced a similar solidarity effort as it sought to “build active and lasting friendship based on mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of China.”⁹¹ The USCPFA not only took up educational programs and solidarity trips but also provided firsthand accounts of Chinese life and political analysis through its magazine, *New China*.

Although the USCPFA garnered greater support among younger radicals than the NCASF, both these organizations and their journals relied on members of the “Old Left” to sustain their work in the 1970s. For example, *New China* counted among its contributors left-leaning activists such as Helen

Rosen, a longtime friend of the Robesons, and the scholar William Hinton, while the *New World Review* counted the black leftist and longtime journalist George Murphy Jr. as a member of its board of directors and the peace activist Elizabeth Moos as a regular contributor. Both Murphy and Moos also served as board members of the Council of American-Soviet Friendship, and Moos also contributed articles to *New China*. Both organizations specifically drew support from veteran black women radicals. Several black women who had worked closely with the *New World Review* and its editor, Jessica Smith, during the 1950s, including the civil rights activists Halois Moorhead, Eslanda Robeson, Shirley Graham Du Bois, and Vicki Garvin, returned to this type of solidarity work in the 1970s.⁹²

In part, these connections were based on longstanding friendship and a history of exchange with the Soviet Union that for many dated back to the 1930s. Yet, a number of these women also continued to view the Soviet Union, despite the exposure, in 1956, of Stalin's brutality and the country's growing lack of credibility among the New Left, as a powerful model of revolutionary change and as an important alternative to U.S. dominance. The Soviet Union's support of the Cuban Revolution, along with Cuban and Soviet financial support for anticolonial revolutionary struggles in Vietnam and Angola (which the Chinese Communist Party did not support), lent powerful evidence to this claim.⁹³

Some other black women were drawn to solidarity work with the *New World Review* and the NCASF through their desire to travel to the Soviet Union to view socialism in action. Alice Childress became involved with the NCASF and contributed to the journal through her travels to the Soviet Union as part of a NCASF "black delegation" that visited in August of 1971. The black leftist and journalist George Murphy Jr., a leader of both the *New World Review* and the NCSAF, had organized the delegation and personally recruited Alice Childress. Murphy also arranged for Childress to be interviewed about her experiences and for an article based on her interview to be published in the *New World Review*.⁹⁴ In the published article, Childress spoke of wanting to visit the Soviet Union out of a lifelong interest in and curiosity about the country and her desire to "see it for myself and make my own judgment." Reflecting her own longstanding political concerns, she addressed the treatment of women and Afro-Soviets in the country and celebrated her ability to "learn a great deal" about "how socialism works in the USSR," an experience she longed to share with "my people, African Americans." Although Childress proclaimed her desire to "to return again" to the Soviet Union, this never materialized. She had few interactions with Soviet

solidarity organizing efforts after the trip, even though she remained interested in witnessing socialism at work and would later travel to China.⁹⁵

Two years later, Thelma Dale Perkins made her first trip to the Soviet Union as part of an “Afro-American delegation” again organized by George Murphy Jr. Following the trip, Dale Perkins penned a piece for the *New World Review* in which she recounted her experience and impressions. Titled “A Letter to Paul Robeson on Our Visit to Mt. Robeson,” the article was written as a letter to Paul Robeson in honor of his upcoming seventy-fifth birthday.⁹⁶ The letter addressed a set of concerns similar to those discussed in Childress’s interview; Dale Perkins detailed her interactions with Afro-Soviets and her insights into the role of women in Soviet politics and industry. Yet, the article also noted the high esteem in which the Soviet people held black radicals such as Paul Robeson and Angela Davis.

Dale Perkins had worked with both the *New World Review* and the NCASF long before her travels to the Soviet Union. In 1971, she helped to plan a bon voyage party for Alice Childress and other members of that year’s black delegation.⁹⁷ She also continued to work with these organizations after her own trip abroad. In 1974, Dale Perkins served as co-chairperson and key organizer of the *New World Review*’s April luncheon “in honor of the United Nations ambassadors of the socialist world.” Held at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel, the “historic event” drew UN representatives from the Soviet Union, Cuba, and numerous Eastern European socialist countries; it also included presentations by Henry Winston, national chairman of the CP, and the recently acquitted Angela Davis. For the *New World Review*, the event represented one of their most successful efforts, as editor Jessica Smith proclaimed the gathering a “glowing affirmation of the increasing strength and unity of the socialist world” and “an international demonstration of the meaning of détente, of the retreat of imperialism before the advances of the world’s socialist, peace and liberation forces.”⁹⁸

Other black women radicals joined the organizing efforts of the NCASF and the *New World Review* as a way to reengage with left politics. Marvel Cooke began working with both organizations after the Angela Davis campaign came to an end. For Cooke, the work proved an important form of radical activism that allowed her to remain connected to old allies while also engaging with a new generation of radical politics. Already acquainted with Jessica Smith and friendly with several people who worked with the NCASF, Cooke became involved in both organizations because of these relationships and “because they did greet me with open arms” and “there was plenty I could do there.” She was also a strong supporter of the Council’s exchange



Vicki Garvin (left) and Thelma Dale Perkins at a gathering for Louise Thompson Patterson in New York in 1987. (Louise Thompson Patterson Collection, Manuscript, Archives and Rare Book Library, Emory University)

programs and its continued ties to peace activism. Cooke worked on events organized by the *New World Review* and the Council and led their fundraising committee. She continued this work well into the 1980s, even taking on the position of national vice chairman.⁹⁹ Both Marvel Cooke and Thelma Dale Perkins remember fondly their work in building U.S.-Soviet solidarity during the 1970s and the diligent leadership of Jessica Smith. In part, their positive experiences reflected their support for the political work, but it also must have been exciting to reconnect with longtime allies, while actively engaging with a new period of radical internationalism.

While the majority of these black women who reconnected with socialist solidarity organizing did so through work with the Soviet Union, other women, such as Vicki Garvin and Shirley Graham Du Bois, who had lived in China for some years and who advocated a more explicitly nationalist politics, lent their support to the USCPFA. As Garvin readjusted to political life in the States, she sought to reestablish her political activism by working with the U.S.-China Friendship Network. Garvin gave numerous talks at schools and churches about her experiences in China, promoted the Network's activities, and called for greater support for China and the Chinese Communist

Party.¹⁰⁰ As the scholar Max Elbaum attests, the Network had widespread support, particularly among younger radicals. In 1973, more than twenty U.S. cities held celebrations in honor of the anniversary of the Chinese Revolution, and, by 1974, more than thirty-five local U.S.-China Friendship Network Committees existed throughout the country.¹⁰¹

Also in 1974, the Network expanded into the U.S.-China Peoples Friendship Association and began publication of a quarterly journal, *New China*, to publicize its solidarity efforts and to present informed accounts of life in China. Vicki Garvin joined the editorial board of the magazine, working alongside a fellow expatriate, Gerald Tannenbaum, and a number of younger activists and scholars. Garvin also reached out to black activists with whom she had worked in supporting Paul Robeson and *Freedom* newspaper. Garvin recruited Alice Childress to contribute an article on Paul Robeson for the June 1976 issue of *New China* to commemorate his recent passing and his lifelong support for the People's Republic of China. Childress had traveled to China in April 1973 as part of a tour organized by the *Guardian*. Although she left little record of her experiences and her reactions to the country, her willingness to contribute to *New China* suggests some continued affinity.¹⁰² In the same issue, Helen Rosen published an interview with Harry Belafonte in which he discussed his longstanding interest in China and his continued desire to visit the country, as well as his recent performance at a *New China* fundraiser.¹⁰³ Garvin was not alone among the seasoned activists who had longstanding ties to a CP-affiliated black left but were increasingly drawn to the Chinese Revolution and the theoretical insights of Chairman Mao. In addition to Childress and Belafonte, Shirley Graham Du Bois was a very active member in the USCPFA and its New York chapter. Graham Du Bois was particularly engaged in the organization's effort to address the role of women in China, speaking at the USCPFA's 1975 "International Women's Day" program on "Women in China."¹⁰⁴

Conclusion

The organizing and feminist visions that emerged from the campaigns in support of Angela Davis and Joan Little, as well as the international solidarity efforts with China, the Soviet Union, Ghana, and other decolonizing nations, were clearly reminiscent of the earlier politics that had shaped the campaign to free Rosa Lee Ingram, international women's peace activism, and Popular Front anticolonial struggles. These connections did not escape the notice of the black women who had been involved in such activism during the 1940s

and 1950s and were still active well into the 1970s. “I feel as if magically I’ve gone backwards,” wrote Beulah Richardson to Louise Thompson Patterson in late 1976. Richardson’s comments referred most directly to the surprising revival of her poem, “A Black Woman Speaks,” as a stage performance. Undoubtedly, this air of familiarity also spoke to the sense of political continuity she felt with organizing around the Angela Davis and Joan Little cases, as well as the broader political affinity with women’s liberation, the emerging left, and the black power movement.

Nevertheless, for Richardson, the moment felt incomplete. Whether it was the “weight” of experience or her “remembrance of the viciousness of the last time,” she found that this period of revival lacked “the same joyousness we had when first we organized the Sojourners . . . some sense of oneness that of course we know is there.” Such a statement might at first glance appear counterintuitive, particularly given the framing of the 1950s as a nadir in radical activism. But, on closer analysis, Richardson’s words speak to the importance of the pockets of resistance black women radicals created and sustained during this earlier period, as well as the ways anticommunist attacks at times led to greater unity among those who continued to be active.¹⁰⁵ These bonds and political solidarity outlived all of the CP-affiliated organizations that brought this community of black women radicals together and proved an enduring force in their lives and activism as they remained politically engaged and personally connected well after the 1970s.