Mother Russia and the Socialist Fatherland: Women and the Communist Party of Canada, 1932-1941, with specific reference to the activism of Dorothy Livesay and Jim Watts

by

Nancy Butler

A thesis submitted to the Department of History
in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Queen’s University
Kingston, Ontario, Canada
November 2010

Copyright © Nancy Butler, 2010
Abstract

This dissertation traces a shift in the Communist Party of Canada, from the 1929 to 1935 period of militant class struggle (generally known as the ‘Third Period’) to the 1935-1939 Popular Front Against Fascism, a period in which Communists argued for unity and cooperation with social democrats. The CPC's appropriation and redeployment of bourgeois gender norms facilitated this shift by bolstering the CPC's claims to political authority and legitimacy. ‘Woman’ and the gendered interests associated with women—such as peace and prices—became important in the CPC’s war against capitalism. What women represented symbolically, more than who and what women were themselves, became a key element of CPC politics in the Depression decade. Through a close examination of the cultural work of two prominent middle-class female members, Dorothy Livesay, poet, journalist and sometime organizer, and Eugenia (Jean’ or ‘Jim’) Watts, reporter, founder of the Theatre of Action, and patron of the Popular Front magazine New Frontier, this thesis utilizes the insights of queer theory, notably those of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler, not only to reconstruct both the background and consequences of the CPC’s construction of ‘woman’ in the 1930s, but also to explore the significance of the CPC’s strategic deployment of heteronormative ideas and ideals for these two prominent members of the Party.
Acknowledgements

I have had a lot of help, both in researching and writing this thesis and in living through it. Ian McKay has been an excellent advisor, in every sense. His knowledge is astounding, and his incomparable sensitivity and support was vital. My respect for him – as a scholar and a friend - is heartfelt and immense. The Department of History at Queen’s has been a stimulating environment, and the interest and encouragement I received from faculty and staff members was unfailing. I thank Karen Dubinsky for her early and important support, and especially for her comments on earlier drafts, her advice was key to the development of my dissertation.

This dissertation has been a very long time in the making. The person who has borne the weight throughout is my partner, Kate Callaghan, whose faith and support made it possible. I dedicate this work to my beautiful Kate, and to the memory of my very beloved parents, Rosemary and Harry Butler.
### Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACCL</td>
<td>All-Canadian Congress of Labour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AFL</td>
<td>American Federation of Labor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCF</td>
<td>Co-operative Commonwealth Federation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEC</td>
<td>Central Executive Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CI</td>
<td>Communist International</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLDL</td>
<td>Canadian Labour Defence League</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLP</td>
<td>Canadian Labour Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPC</td>
<td>Communist Party of Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPSU</td>
<td>Communist Party of the Soviet Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPUSA</td>
<td>Communist Party of the United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECCI</td>
<td>Executive Committee of the Communist International</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JWMS</td>
<td>Dorothy Livesay, <em>Journeys With My Selves</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LAC</td>
<td>Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LPP</td>
<td>Labor Progressive Party of Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEP</td>
<td>New Economic Policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAC</td>
<td>Progressive Arts Club</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RHLH</td>
<td>Dorothy Livesay, <em>Right Hand, Left Hand</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RILU</td>
<td>Red International of Labor Unions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TLC</td>
<td>Trades and Labor Congress of Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TUEL</td>
<td>Trade Union Education League</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USSR</td>
<td>Union of Soviet Socialist Republics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WLL</td>
<td>Women’s Labor League</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WPC</td>
<td>Workers’ Party of Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WUL</td>
<td>Workers’ Unity League</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YCL</td>
<td>Young Communist League</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table of Contents

Abstract .......................................................................................................................... ii

Acknowledgements .......................................................................................................... iii

Abbreviations .................................................................................................................. iv

Chapter One. Beyond the Historical Dichotomies: Depression-era Communism and the Woman Question ................................................................. 1

Chapter Two. The Turbulent Transnational World of Interwar Canadian Communism .............................................................................................................. 74

Chapter Three. The CPC and ‘The Woman Question’: Gender in Class Politics .............................................................................................................. 155

Chapter Four. The Cultural Front of Communism in Canada ...................................................................................................................... 213

Chapter Five. “This struggle is our miracle new found”: Dorothy Livesay and the Cultural Front .............................................................................. 288

Chapter Six. “Every Waking Moment Promoting the Party”: Jim Watts and the Cultural Front .............................................................................. 335

Chapter Seven. Gendered Melancholy: Memory and the Personal Politics of Jim Watts and Dorothy Livesay ........................................................................ 386

Conclusion. Looking Backward, Looking Ahead .................................................................. 437

Bibliography ....................................................................................................................... 448
Chapter One

Beyond the Historical Dichotomies: Depression-era Communism and the Woman Question

The Communist Party of Canada (CPC) was organized in May, 1921, at a legendary meeting in a barn near Guelph, Ontario. Initially working under the shadow of illegality, it created the “Workers’ Party of Canada” (WPC) as its public face in 1922, then assumed its full public identity upon its legalization in 1924. It was the product of difficult negotiations between two rival Communist organizations also active in the United States, which were facilitated by emissaries from the Communist International (CI or Comintern). From its inception, the CPC was hence strongly influenced by Communist parties beyond Canada, notably those in the United States and Great Britain, and particularly by the directives from the Communist International. Members of the CPC regarded themselves as “Soldiers of the International,” sworn to uphold what they understood to be Lenin’s model of politics, which centrally entailed a vanguard party of revolutionaries leading the working class in Canada towards the dictatorship of the proletariat — that is, the overthrow of the existing Canadian political order and establishment of the rule of the workers, who would use state power to liquidate the bourgeoisie and institute a new order of things, ultimately culminating in the abolition of classes and the state itself.

In its early years, and following Lenin’s advice in *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*, provincial wings of the WPC/CPC affiliated with the Canadian Labour Party, founded by the Trades and Labour Congress in 1917 as the political arm of labour. This “united front” strategy, whereby Communists would enter pre-existing labour unions and political parties, not only brought Communists into positions of influence in the mainstream labour movement, but also entailed
controversy with such bodies as the One Big Union (OBU) that followed a strategy of organizing workers in unions opposed to those affiliated with the TLC. Such a strategy of the “united front” would also characterize CPC politics in other fields. Then, in the late 1920s, the “line” of the Comintern shifted, and the very different “Third Period,” one in which the Communists established their own unions and critiqued social democrats and other leftists as “social fascists,” took hold. This new direction was also associated with the purge of the top leaders of the old party, and the arrival of a new cohort, ostensibly more loyal to Joseph Stalin. It was this new leadership that implemented yet another “line change” in the mid-1930s, when in the name of resisting Fascism, the CPC committed itself to the creation of a Popular Front, which it envisaged uniting not only Communists and social democrats, but also anti-fascist “progressives” of all stripes. Thus, in focusing on the period 1932-1941, this thesis is looking at a period of Communist history in which the CPC underwent, for the second time in its history, a major transformation of its perspective. Much about the history of the CPC is controversial, and this chapter sets out to introduce the historiography dedicated to the Party, explore unresolved and highly contentious issues, and set out the agenda for the remainder of the thesis. In essence, I argue that debates about the Party have been limited by a variety of dichotomies, and I see my thesis as a way of advancing beyond them.

Little controversy attaches to one crucial point about the CPC: it was profoundly inspired by the Russian Revolution, militantly committed to the defence of the Soviet Union as the first place in which workers had set out to establish a thorough-going socialist state, and equally respectful of the advice it received from the leaders of that revolution, both in Russia and in the Comintern. Counsel received from the Comintern was anything but idle advice—in the minds of Communists, it had much greater symbolic and political force. In the Third Period,
for instance, the Comintern repeatedly warned of a war against the Soviet Union that would wipe out the gains the workers of the world had won from the revolution.

For Depression-era Communists, the Soviet Union was proof of the possibility that society could be remade to enable the development and freedom of all of its members. The importance of the Soviet Union as socialist homeland, the model inspiring workers to take control of their lives and demand equality, prompted a level of support from members that is difficult to fathom in our post-Soviet times. In the crisis years of the Depression, support for the Soviet Union was synonymous with members’ faith in socialism.¹ The official positions the CPC took on all questions, including those related to the roles of women, were shaped by the imperatives of building support for, and following the example of, the Soviet Union. Under Stalin's leadership, the Communist Party embraced the bourgeois dictum that the well-ordered family is the basis of the well-ordered state.² After his full assumption of leadership of the Communist movement after 1928, and particularly after the promulgation of new laws respecting women and the family in the mid-1930s, the CPC began to argue that the defence of the traditional family was one of its core doctrines.

The launch of the Third Period in 1928 committed Communists to a series of highly contentious theses. A period of postwar capitalist stabilization was coming to an end, and one of epochal crisis, class polarization and revolutionary upheaval was beginning, the Comintern proclaimed. In this revolutionary situation, it was the responsibility of Communists to unmask and remove social democrats — “social fascists” — who, rather than allies with whom one should unite, were class enemies one should fight tooth and nail. With respect to labour, the new line seemingly endorsed a much hardened stance against the labour “fakirs” and opportunists who

¹ This was a view strengthened by the reports of “hopeful travelers” who voyaged to the Soviet Union and came back with generally favourable accounts. See, for example, George Williams, The Land of the Soviets (Saskatoon: United Farmers of Canada, Saskatchewan Section Ltd., n.d. [1931]).
² See Joan Scott, Gender and the Politics of History (New York: Columbia, 1988) 47.
made up the mainstream labour movement and for the creation of revolutionary
trade-union movements under Communist leadership. It also suggested the
importance of rallying to the ranks of the Communists all who might be of strategic
and tactical importance in the forthcoming global war of class against class.3

This Third Period slogan -- “class against class” -- was worked out in a
complicated way in the Canadian setting. If in many respects CPC ultra-sectarianism
duplicated in Canada many of the disastrous patterns found around the western
world -- it is plausibly held to be at least partially responsible for the collapse of the
German left and the rise of Nazism -- it was shaped by the peculiarities of the
Canadian setting. Through the 1920s, there was no established, strong and nation-
wide party of social democracy standing in the way of the CPC. In contrast with
their comrades in most of western Europe, then, Canadian Communists had, at least
in theory, a much more open field. The CPC’s embrace of a strategy of frontal
assaults on the established order, entailing (for instance) a succession of violent
crashes with police in Montreal and Toronto, established the Party as a lightning-rod
of rebellion for the millions of disaffected men and women hurt by the Depression.
The federal Conservative government’s attempts to smash the Party added to its
appeal, as did its willingness to undertake struggles avoided by other elements of
labour and the left.4 Consequently, the Third Period presents something of a
paradox in Canada. As John Manley, the foremost historian of the Third Period in
Canada, remarks, if one judged the Third Period on the basis of the period 1928–1931

---

3 On the Third Period, see especially Matthew Worley, Class Against Class: The Communist Party in
Britain between the Wars (London: I.B. Taurus, 2002); K. McDermott, and Jeremy Agnew, The
Comintern: A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin (New York: St. Martin’s
Press, 1997).

4 For good analyses and descriptions of the CPC’s Third Period tactics, see Bob Oliver, “The Politics
of the Pavement: Canadian Communism in the late 1920s and early 1930s,” unpublished research
paper, Queen’s University, 2002; J. Petryshyn, “R.B. Bennett and the Communists: 1930-1935,” Journal
of Canadian Studies 9 (1974): 43-55; “Class Conflict and Civil Liberties: The Origins and Activities of the
Canadian Labour Defense League, 1925-1940,” Labour/Le Travailleur, 10 (Autumn 1982): 39-64. The
classic text in which a Communist denounced as “social fascists” the social democrats in the emergent
CCF was that of G. Pierce [Stewart Smith], Socialism and the CCF (Montreal: Contemporary
Publishing, 1934). It was his misfortune that the Comintern line was already shifting when his
publication appeared.
one in which the existing leadership was displaced and membership halved from 2,876 to 1,385 in the eighteen months leading up to February, and in which the CPC launched an extraordinary battle against “police terror” culminating in the imprisonment of seven CPC leaders and the deportation of an eighth — then the verdict of a “ruinous” Third Period must stand. But if we look back from the vantage-point of December 1934, with a membership exceeding 6,000 and “some 17,000 members and sympathisers pack[ing] Maple Leaf Gardens to give a hero’s welcome to the recently freed Tim Buck,” it seems a more qualified verdict is in order.\(^5\)

Part of the Third Period was an intensified drive to “Bolshevize” the party — to make it structurally far more dependent upon workplace “cells,” to reduce if not eliminate the “federalism” inherent in the presence of the language federations (important in a party in which those of Finnish, Ukrainian and Jewish descent made up as much as 90% of the membership),\(^6\) and thus transform it into the “monolith” its leaders had long idealized. Many of these Third Period emphases continued to set the tone of the Party’s official publications. Yet, on the ground, the Party found itself drawn into a series of struggles that in effect qualified the monolithic proletarianism of its theory. As the economic crisis continued, Party members fought for the relief and defence of a beleaguered working class, and paid increasing attention to the domestic lives and roles of its members. In its work on behalf of the unemployed, male and female, and working-class families, the CPC had shown itself to be one of the few organized groups able to respond to the crisis. And with this


\(^{6}\) National Archives and Library Canada, MG 10 K 3, Comintern Fonds [hereafter Comintern Fonds], Delio 495, Opis 98 [Reel K-276], Political Secretariat, ECCI to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Canada, 8 April 1929. According to the ECCI letter, 95% of the party membership “is confined to three language groups (Finnish, Ukrainian and Jewish.” It adds: “Such a National composition is a serious barrier between the Party and the masses which must be surmounted before it can really call itself a Communist Party leading and reflecting the interests of the Canadian workers.”
role inherently came a complexity of strategy and tactics that contrasted sharply with the Party’s “monolithic” proclamations.\(^7\)

The present-day historian interested in the CPC inherits an extremely rich historical literature. Since the appearance of William Rodney’s *Soldiers of the International* in 1969, the CPC has been described and analysed in works of sound scholarship and sober judgment, with the work of John Manley standing out in particular for its originality, scope and rigour.\(^8\) William Rodney’s study, based on extensive government and public sources, archival and published, and interviews, was the first scholarly monograph on the communist movement in Canada. It still serves as an invaluable resource for historians. Rodney ends his study of the CPC in 1929, the year that the CI’s policy of bolshevization finally re-shaped the Canadian Party. Rodney sees subsequent CPC history as the playing out of a dynamic fully established by Stalin in 1928-29, and he attributes the CPC’s overall failure to remake

---

\(^7\) For example, as Stefan Epp shows, while the CPC in Winnipeg indulged in the “social fascist” rhetoric indelibly associated with the Third Period, it also pursued blatantly united-front tactics with its competitors on the left within the Winnipeg City Council. (Significantly, the Winnipeg Communists sent the first North American Communist to a City Council in 1926). See “Placing the Revolutionary Party on the Parliamentary Map: Communists in Winnipeg Municipal Politics during the Third Period.” M.A. Research Paper, Pattern II, Queen’s University, 2008.

Canada to its reliance upon the Soviet model: “[T]he Party’s attempts to implement Comintern policies put it increasingly out of touch with the realities of Canadian political, social, and economic life. After 1929, in conditions that ostensibly were ideally suited for a proletarian movement, the CPC made no lasting impact upon the Canadian people.” Rodney here introduced one of the more contentious themes of CPC history, which relates to periodization: in essence, was the “high point” of Canadian Communist history in the 1920s, when the Party enjoyed some capacity to make up its own mind on important questions (most notoriously, it balked when it was asked unequivocally to endorse the anti-Trotsky campaign that started in 1924)? Or did it come in the Third Period, when the Party organized so many of the unorganized? Or in the period of the Popular Front, when its numbers rose to unprecedented levels? Or in the 1940s, when it sent its first members to the House of Commons? To those sympathetic to one or all of the latter three positions, Rodney’s dismissal of the CPC’s post-1928 years will seem far too unequivocal, because he seemingly makes no allowance for the post-1935 years in which the CPC had made a major impact on many Canadians, especially in the Popular Front and the CIO unions. Rodney provides a detailed account of the Canadian Party’s relationship to the CI and to Stalin’s CPSU. This is definitely the book’s strength, but it is also its limitation: Rodney analyses the structures and personalities of the CPC, but says little about how they worked in the day-to-day operations of the CPC itself and within the wider socialist movement in Canada. He provides, that is, an immensely useful account of the CPC as an institution that tells us relatively little about its wider cultural and social significance. His conclusion that Soviet dominance ensured the failure of the CPC to implant itself into the ostensibly fertile ground of the Canadian labour movement reflected and reinforced the tendency to read the CPC’s history primarily in light of the international context, and to dismiss the

---

9 Rodney, *Soldiers of the International* 160. This view is also shared by Ian Angus, but qualified (although perhaps not unequivocally) by John Manley.
significance of local support for revolutionary socialism in Canada. However, the substance of Rodney’s account – his careful reconstruction of key figures and organizations within the CPC – set an impressive standard for subsequent scholarship.

Ian Angus’s *Canadian Bolsheviks: the Early Years of the Canadian Communist Party* was originally published in 1981 and republished (as an e-text) in 2004. Like Rodney’s work, *Canadian Bolsheviks* is a detailed study of the first decade of the CPC, a close analysis based on extensive research, the breadth and scope of which has not been duplicated. Also like Rodney’s work, it approaches the CPC as an institution, an organization whose great potential was hijacked by Stalin following Lenin’s death early in 1924. Angus writes as a Trotskyist, which has meant that his work, while widely admired, has also been seen as partisan. In his review of *Canadian Bolsheviks*, Bryan Palmer sees this as a credit, and gives it an almost unqualified endorsement. Palmer does not avoid the controversy created by Angus’s political slant. Rather, he adds polemical fuel to the fire, describing the history of the CPC as a “timid tale,” and referring to “social democracy’s orgiastic warmongering and abdication of socialist responsibility.” Such metaphors are intended to intensify Angus’s already warm condemnations of the CPC, an organization Palmer compares to career-minded academics (“theoretically wooden, politically opportunistic.”)

While Palmer’s review is a welcome effort to open scholarly discussion to the wider community, his anticipatory characterization of that discussion is dismissive.

A commonsensical objection to the Rodney-Angus line of interpretation is that it simply excludes a vast amount of interesting CPC history. Third Period dogma, the onset and deepening of the Great Depression, and an unusually aggressive right-wing government combined to make the CPC a topic of everyday

---

conversation in the early 1930s. As conditions in Canada worsened throughout 1931, state repression of the Party escalated. In August, 1931 eight prominent Party figures (all male), including leader Tim Buck and prominent union organizer Tom Ewen, were arrested in a police sweep. They were convicted in November and sent to Kingston Penitentiary in February, 1932; Tomo Cacic was deported. Rather than dampening support for the Party, their conviction increased public interest in the Communists as defenders of civil rights, and contributed to the eventual success of a party-led campaign for the repeal of Section 98, that draconian part of the Criminal Code under which they had been sentenced.

During a prison riot in October 1932, five shots were fired into Tim Buck’s cell by a guard stationed at an outside window. Buck survived, but the following spring the Superintendent of Prisons charged Buck with “incitement to riot.” Buck maintained that he had sought to placate, not incite, prisoners during the riot. Nevertheless, nine months for incitement to riot was added to his sentence. Not shy of publicity, the CPC mounted a strenuous campaign, punctuated by the performance on 4 December 1933 of a highly controversial play, Eight Men Speak, based on the events in Kingston. When the play was banned, the CPC organized a public protest meeting, where Progressive Arts Club (PAC) members staged an abbreviated version for a packed audience. The chair of the meeting, A.E. Smith, who brought to his CPC-related activism a stellar record as a Methodist social gospeller, was arrested and charged with sedition. In March 1934 Buck was called by the defense as a witness at Smith’s trial. Buck’s presence at the trial was designed to place the attempt on his life at Kingston Penitentiary on the public record, and force a public enquiry: his response to the first question he was asked in the

---


courtroom was the statement “I was shot at....” He was whisked out of the courtroom, but the tide had turned and the CPC was gaining strength.\(^{13}\)

John Manley has added considerable depth to our understanding of this “line change” in Canada. In one important study of Tim Buck, from 2002, he credits A.E. Smith with anticipating many of the Popular Front emphases on left unity and anti-sectarianism, a stance then assumed by Tim Buck after his release from Kingston Penitentiary.\(^{14}\) In a 2004 study, he notes that Canada’s “Third Period” might “be said to have begun a year early,” with the imposition of “Bolshevization” on the language federations in 1926, a new homegrown, rank-and-file-driven strategy of red unionism, and the growing marginalization of the MacDonald-Spector leadership, even before the official announcement of the “Third Period” at the sixth Comintern congress in 1928. Similarly, he remarks that well before the Seventh Congress of the Communist International in August 1935, i.e. the one in which the policy of joining with social democratic forces in a Popular Front Against Fascism became official, the Communist-led Workers’ Unity League (WUL) showed clear signs of outgrowing Third Period sectarianism.\(^{15}\) In fact, by late 1934 the CPC was unofficially engaged in building a popular front. Manley thus underlines a paradoxical pattern important for this thesis. Although he considers Third Period sectarianism disastrous, he also observes that by December 1934, party membership exceeded 6,000, a record. In short, the Party’s record of resistance against the Bennett regime and its willingness to organize the unorganized meant that the Third Period was one in which the CPC became a much larger and more important party.\(^{16}\) All the more incongruous, then, was Tim Buck’s leadership style, which Manley considers obsequious. According to Manley, Buck “contributed significantly to making the Party a respectable, if


\(^{14}\) Manley, “'Audacity, Audacity, Still More Audacity'”; Mitchell, “A.E.Smith.”

\(^{15}\) John Manley, “Red or Yellow,” 220-246.

\(^{16}\) Manley, “Red or Yellow,” 220.
incompletely integrated, part of the national body politic.” Yet the movement as a whole was weakened insofar as “the CPC lost any connection to revolutionary politics.”\textsuperscript{17} Buck’s pacific style of politics, combined with emphasis on ‘people’ and ‘progress,’ rather than workers and revolution, meant that the CPC crafted “its own transformation into a reformist organization to the right of the CCF.”\textsuperscript{18}

Like John Manley, my view is that the CPC’s effort to align itself with liberals and social democrats during the Popular Front Against Fascism constituted a departure from revolutionary politics in some respects.\textsuperscript{19} However, I do not interpret this shift as one that entailed an irrevocable loss of revolutionary substance or an irredeemable departure from class politics. The Popular Front brought the CPC unparalleled influence and popularity, and enabled members to undertake political and cultural work that embodied their own ideas about and interest in revolutionary politics. This was not class politics as it had been understood in the Third Period, but it was still one continuous with the revolutionary objectives of the movement. In short, the Popular Front was (for a time) effective in Canada and it was (and remains) a valuable strategy for socialism.

One of the most striking features of the Popular Front was the cultural revolution it called for and, to a surprising extent, carried out. To an extent, this innovation represented a continuity with the Third Period. In the late 1920s, Stalin had demanded a “great break” with bourgeois culture, and his advice echoed throughout the Communist parties around the world. Sheila Fitzpatrick has argued that Stalin’s attacks on bourgeois culture amounted to an attack on bourgeois authority, in everything from culture to technology. They were meant to establish that the Party not only represented the interests of, but literally embodied, the Soviet proletariat. The CPSU’s identification with the Soviet working class, coupled

\textsuperscript{17} John Manley, ""Audacity, Audacity, Still More Audacity,”” 40 .\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.\textsuperscript{19} For additional insights on the Popular Front in Canada, see Anne E Scotton, “Unity on the Left: Ontario in the 1930s.” M.A. Thesis, Carleton University, 1977.
with its absolute control of the state, justified the Party’s claim that workers’
hegemony was synonymous with Party control. Symptoms of this early version of
Communist cultural revolution in Canada included the rapid growth of the Young
Communist League (YCL) in the early 1930s, a development that worked to
counteract the stark declines in membership occasioned by the turmoil of the late
1920s. Many young communists were strongly committed to an ideal of “living
otherwise” and breaking with the stifling Victorian complacency of the culture
around them. For the first time, the CPC began to attract, as members or more
often as ‘sympathizers,’ significant numbers of university students and even some
faculty members. Among the new members were artists and intellectuals. Perhaps
the epitome and symbol of this new cultural ferment was the Progressive Arts Club,
which formed in Toronto at the end of 1931. The PAC has justifiably received
considerable attention from historians of Left politics and culture, and has been
reclaimed as an important presence in interwar Canadian culture.

More than the YCL or the CPC itself, the PACs gave a home, within the
working-class movement, to those trained and talented in cultural work. With the
formation of the PACs the Party broadened its constituency, and recognized the
impact of the depression on every level and sector of Canadian society. For those
who now saw common cause with the working class as the way out of the crisis,
activism on behalf of, if not membership in the Party, seemed a logical step.

***

on to describe the mid-1930s reinstitution of much of the old intelligentsia and much of its cultural
heritage (162).
[21] For the PAC, see Toby Gordon Ryan, Stage Left: Canadian Theatre in the Thirties (Toronto: CTR
Publications, 1981); James Doyle, Progressive Heritage: the Evolution of a Politically Radical Literary
Tradition in Canada (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2002); Alan Filewod, “The
Comintern and the Canon: Workers’ Theatre, Eight Men Speak and the Genealogy of mise-en-
scène,” Australasian Drama Studies 29 (October 1996): 17-32; “The Ideological Formation of Political
Theatre in Canada,” Theatre History in Canada 8, 2 (Fall 1987): 254-263. For U.S. parallels, see Jay
Williams, Stage Left (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1974); Colette A. Hyman, Staging Strikes:
As it became the largest single organized force on the Canadian political left in the 1920s, the CPC inherited the complex legacy of socialist feminism, a significant left current in Canada since the 1890s. Three scholars in particular have offered general evaluations of its pre-1920s strengths and weaknesses. In *The Feminist Challenge to the Canadian Left* (1995), Janice Newton offers an unequivocal verdict: the Canadian left in general failed to sustain the socialist feminist vision. The early socialist movement included feminists whose objectives and ideas were increasingly marginalized within the movement with the predominance of the Socialist Party of Canada (SPC) from 1902 to c.1911. She argues that the “failure of the socialist movement to advance feminism rested partly on its ultimate rejection of the significance of the domestic realm for the socialist agenda.”\(^2\) Newton argues that women’s identification with family and home was the basis of working-class feminists’ political investment in and agency within the socialist movement; the SPC, with its vision of scientific socialism, denied and downplayed the concerns of women and maternalism. As a result socialist feminism — a distinctive force on the left, whose proponents consciously identified with the ideal of sexual equality — came to be marginalized. Newton’s argument boils down to the view that not only were women a significant element in the early days of the Canadian socialist movement, but their socialism was more radical and well-rounded than that of the male leaders who dominated the organization and defined its agenda in the terms of scientific socialism. In arguing that the “majority of socialist men used their dominant positions within the SPC to articulate and defend a masculine view of socialism,” Newton asserts rather than interrogates the role that sexual difference played in shaping early Canadian socialism.\(^3\) Newton relies heavily on conventional

---

\(^3\) Ibid., 168.
associations of masculinity and femininity and the result is that she adds detail and indignation to a familiar story with a known ending. Newton conclusively shows that “[s]ocialist women turned maternal feminism to socialist ends. In so doing they articulated a vision of socialism that was far more radical and egalitarian than the “scientific” socialism of the SPC.” For Newton, the effort to advance women’s interests and concerns within the movement was a self-consciously feminist undertaking that was ultimately undone by sheer male dominance – structural and ideological. Yet in order to know more fully how feminism was effectively marginalized and the battle against male dominance was lost, we need more analysis, of both the structures and ideology of power within the movement.

Linda Kealey’s *Enlisting Women for the Cause: Women, Labour, and the Left in Canada, 1890–1920* (1998) focused on the ways in which working class women were able to exercise a limited autonomy in a male-dominated and male-defined labour movement. Kealey concludes that the impact women were able to make was limited by sexism and shaped overall by maternalist views of women’s place and women’s work. Kealey commends the efforts women made to establish a place for themselves at work and in the wider labour movement, but also acknowledges the difficulties they faced in organizing and representing themselves as workers and as women. Women’s identification with their maternal function was widely used against their organizing efforts. This provided skeptics and sexists with a reason for denying women identification (and protection) as workers, and a basis for questioning women’s commitment to labour militancy and unity. In her study Kealey includes the activism of women at work, in the community, and in the labour movement. She insists that “a wider perspective on what constitutes women’s activism yields a new appreciation for what women did in fact accomplish. This wider view, in turn,

---

demands a rejection of any narrow definition of what is judged as ‘political.’” Kealey argues that an adequate understanding of women’s contributions to the early socialist movement in Canada depends on acknowledging this expanded sense of the political. Women’s political agency was a fragmented phenomenon, taken up when and where possible, limited by the material and cultural constraints women faced in their daily lives. In emphasizing the diversity of women’s contributions, as workers and as wives, daughters and mothers, Kealey gives an account of women’s role as constrained by the prevailing conservatism within the labour movement as well as the broader social context. She acknowledges the gendered limitations to women’s part in the early socialist movement, describing these as structural and ideological constraints to radical change. Kealey finds evidence of women’s political agency on the Canadian Left, insofar as women exercised pressure – at home, in auxiliaries, in factories – in support of socialism. Kealey sees this pressure as a distinctly feminist force within the wider socialist movement, and argues that working-class women themselves endorsed and identified with the feminist argument for sexual equality. This conclusion relies on characterizing what working-class women did in and on the Left as feminist, whether these women identified themselves explicitly as feminist or not. Kealey acknowledges that “[i]n practical as well as political terms, socialism in Canada was associated with manliness, and women’s work within socialism officially excluded roles associated with masculine pursuits. . . The effect of such exclusions was to assign women secondary and supportive roles, punctuated occasionally by an ‘unusual’ woman who might transcend her feminine limitations.” Kealey’s assessment of women’s status in the early labour movement in Canada is clear-eyed: she concludes that women, despite their formidable achievements, remained marginal figures in the Canadian labour movement.

26 Ibid., 256.
In *Reasoning Otherwise: Leftists and the People’s Enlightenment in Canada, 1890–1920* (2008) Ian McKay looks at how early socialists responded to issues of women’s inequality. Against more pessimistic accounts such as Newton’s, McKay describes the output of women such as Margaret Haile, Frances Beynon, Alice Chown, and Helena Gutteridge, whose work illustrates the diversity and depth of socialist feminist work. While acknowledging the limitations of the evolutionary framework in which most of this work was formulated, informed as it often was by a social-evolutionary emphasis on women’s reproductive function, McKay argues that its significance consisted not in any answers or solutions offered, but in the ways these activists “opened up, in highly original ways, issues of gender identity and sexuality, masculinity and femininity. As a result, for leftists and people outside the left, previously taken for granted aspects of the lives of men and women – marriage, the regulation of sexuality, the existence of sexual minorities – became at the very least subjects of discussion.” McKay concludes, perhaps too optimistically, that the “reductively named ‘woman question’ became a series of questions that actual women posed to capitalism – and to their often sexist comrades. In this new way of questioning, women shared significant interests and, potentially, a new conception of hegemonic struggle.”

Women who wanted to resist the oppressive conditions of capitalism and patriarchy could call upon the forms of scientific discourse favoured by early socialists: “militant resistance was scientifically mandated because of women’s particular evolutionary role.” McKay’s reading of the impact of the increasingly scientific orientation in arguments for socialism is thus the polar opposite of that of Janice Newton. Given the prestige of “science” among both the early socialists and the Communists, this difference of opinion is significant.

---

27 McKay, *Reasoning*, 341. This discussion lapsed in the second, communist formation. It should be borne in mind that McKay is addressing a broad cohort of leftists and socialists, not a particular party.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid., 340.

What all three scholars show is that when it attained leadership of the organized left in Canada in the 1920s, the CPC inherited a body of theory and a tradition of activism, not to mention actual theorists and activists, for whom women’s equality was a core socialist demand. Failure to answer the ‘Woman Question’ would mean disregarding this past; it would also disqualify the CPC in the eyes of its competitors, who were also well aware of the socialist feminist legacy. Moreover, as a party that placed an ever-increasing emphasis on the canonical texts of Marx, Engels, and Lenin, the CPC found itself inescapably tied to founders’ statements endorsing feminist arguments. Much as some male Communists might have preferred to relegate such issues to the margins, or simply to repeat stereotypical myths about family life current in mainstream culture, they had to confront a no less canonical figure than Frederick Engels, who had historicized the family as central to capitalism. Especially in urban Canada, the Communists were also moving in broader radical circles in which non-canonical radical writers and activists on the ‘Woman Question’ enjoyed substantial influence. Activists were reading Bernard Shaw’s work on the issue, and they were also influenced by the libertarian views of Emma Goldman, resident in Toronto and a frequent lecturer on gender and sexual politics from an anarchist perspective.

In reconstructing the CPC’s stance with respect to gender politics, it also pays to remember the atmosphere of radical experimentation and democratic ferment that pervaded the Soviet Union in the 1920s—a far cry from the stereotypical “closed society” that would later come to be associated with Stalin’s


Russia. In a society in which everything seemed up for debate, many aspects of daily life -- including the patriarchal power of men, the regulation of sexuality, the liberation of women from the demands of ‘family’ -- were in flux. Russians in the 1920s lived in an atmosphere of radical cultural and political experimentation. One of the clearest signs of the new order of things imposed by Stalin was the shutting down of such discussions and the re-imposition of age-old conventions, including the mid-1930s re-criminalization of male homosexuality and abortion.33

In the Canadian context, the sixth convention of the CPC in June 1929 marked a clear turning point in the history of the Party’s work with women. With this convention, the federated party structure was eradicated and competing venues of political organization and education, such as the language federations and the Women's Labor Leagues, were brought to heel under the banner of international working-class solidarity. The emphasis on industrial organization meant that the articulation of differences created by gender and ethnicity within working-class experience was suppressed within the Party.

In its 1929 convention report, CEC members of the Communist Party of Canada echoed the CI's call for a vigilant politics of class war. The analysis detailed in the report spells out the significance the Party attached to women's employment in industry. While this development signaled the inexorable degradation of labour in capitalist production, the report also argued that women's involvement in wage

---

labour would politicize them and bring them fully into class struggle. In the Third Period (1928-1934/5), the Party viewed its work among women as important not primarily because of the conditions of women, housewives or workers, but because of what women's work in industry signaled about the relations of capital and wage labour, and the pivotal role that women would fill in war industries. The Communist International (CI) repeatedly warned of war against the Soviet Union.\footnote{34 The ECCI had predicted the crisis in its letter to the CEC of the CPC, where it warned Canadian members against mistaking the transitory prosperity of 1929 as proof of North American immunity from the cycle of capitalist crisis in the international economy. This was ‘North American exceptionalism’ and, in the eyes of the Comintern – keen to cleanse the Canadian party of its dissidents – the sin of Jack MacDonald and Florence Custance.}

In Canada, the transition from radical anti-patriarchal experimentation and confrontation to gender and sexual conformity can be documented in the very different trajectories of Florence Custance (1881-1929) and Beckie Buhay (1896-1953), two of the most famous CPC women of the interwar era. Custance, characterized by William Rodney as a “rather prim woman, puritan in her habits and an idealist in outlook,” was born in England, trained as a schoolteacher, married a prosperous contractor, and was based in Toronto, where in the years following 1918 she, along with Maurice Spector, Tom Bell, and William Moriarty, played a decisive role in the Plebs League and the Ontario Labour College, both of which served as seed-beds for the CPC. She attended the 1921 unity convention near Guelph. Such was her prestige that she became Secretary the following October of the Canadian Friends of Soviet Russia, an important support group, the head in February 1922 of the CPC-linked Workers’ Party Women’s Bureau, a delegate to the Berlin Conference of International Workers’ Aid, and an extra party delegate to the Fourth Comintern congress in Moscow, also in 1922. Custance became Secretary of the Canadian Labour Defence League in October 1925, took a leading role in protests against the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, and continued to be the CPC’s leading voice on women’s questions, before she was overthrown on grounds of supposed right-wing
tendencies at the stormy 1929 convention, shortly before her death the same year—a demise hastened, some said, by the violence with which her record had been criticized.39

Rebecca Buhay (1896-1953), more often known as “Becky” or “Beckie” Buhay, was British-born like Custance (although of Jewish heritage). She was radicalized by the Great War turbulence in Montreal, where she played a role in anti-conscription agitation. She gravitated to New York’s Rand School of Social Science in 1918 and early 1919, and entered the Socialist Party of America group in the Bronx, then returned to Montreal as an organizer for the One Big Union, the CPC’s rival and adversary through much of the 1920s, as well as the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America and the Ladies’ Garment Union. She also helped found the Montreal Labour College. In March 1922 Buhay was elected to the executive of the Workers’ Party of Canada, and developed a national reputation as a powerful platform speaker. She came to be trusted with such responsibilities as organizing party schools and served as the business manager of The Worker, the CPC’s official paper in the 1920s.

In contrast to the somewhat austere Custance, with her middle-class associations, the more proletarian Buhay was noted for her ‘maternal warmth’ and was widely known in the Party as a “militant mother” and a model of “militant femininity.”36 It was characteristic of the contradictions of the CPC on gender that, after the Stalinist

---

39 Many of the specific details are drawn from Rodney, *Soldiers of the International*, 164-5, citation at 164. For the accusation that the Party, through its attacks, hastened her demise, see Comintern Fonds, Stewart Smith to John Porter, 27 July 1929, extracts, Delio 495, Opis 98 [Reel K-276, File 72], which refers to the open accusation that “we are responsible for the death of comrade Custance.” Custance had asked for release from her party work in May because of her failing health.

Buhay had cleansed the Party in a most severe fashion, she was commended for her womanly compassion and her sentimentality.

Custance and Buhay took contrasting views of the correct Communist position on the ‘Woman Question.’ Custance's views reflected the influence of Alexandra Kollontai. According to this line of analysis, although women were vested with the social responsibility to reproduce, this by no means defined their political and social significance. Reproduction was merely one part of women's role — it neither defined nor detracted from their wider social and political responsibilities. Custance believed that it was important to involve women as wives and mothers. She sought to revolutionize this role. Custance worked against the Party's misgivings on women in class politics and sought to overcome members' disinterest in work among women. Central to her work was the conviction that it was crucial to address women's particular experience of inequality within the framework of class-based politics. And so it was logical that, in 1926, in the first issue of *The Women Worker*, publication of the Women's Labor Leagues (WLL), Custance included wives in the term “working women.” While male leaders stressed the problems of organizing women workers, and criticized women's reluctance to think of themselves as workers — by implication, ruling housewives out of the proletariat — Custance linked women's interests as wives and mothers to their interests as workers. Custance was a thorough-thinking communist who recognized the political impact of sexual inequality on the struggle for communism. Yet she wholeheartedly accepted and worked within the parameters of Party doctrine, as shown in an editorial published in 1928, in which she wrote that “…if women want more than a truce, if they want true freedom, the struggle against capitalism must take precedence.” Such loyalty to the line was

---

37 This idea would become important in the 1935 Popular Front Against Fascism, when Custance’s ideas were reincarnated within the Party, and her rehabilitation in official Party histories began. In some respects, the post-1935 party lived up to the “petit-bourgeois” stereotype it had earlier misleadingly applied to Custance.
38 See Margaret Hobbs and Joan Sangster, eds. *The Woman Worker, 1926-1929* (St. John's: Canadian Committee on Labour History, 1999), 50, citing *Woman Worker*, April 1928.
insufficient to prevent her downfall in 1929, which was accompanied by a brutal critique of her work among women (this crucial moment in the history of the CPC and women is described at greater length in Chapter Two).

Beckie Buhay succeeded Custance as director of the Women’s Department. Buhay drew on the symbolic strength of the good proletarian woman and emphasized this figure’s power to motivate and sustain class struggle. Buhay was herself the embodiment of the Party’s ideal working-class woman, committed to the Party and powerful in it. Yet like other women prominent in the Communist movement, but to a point contrasting with Custance, Buhay’s prominence relied on her strict submission to party authority. She filled, as Custance did not, the role of the Party’s dutiful wife and daughter. Her organizational and secretarial skills did not pose an intellectual challenge to the consolidating ‘commonsense’ on gender questions. Through her unflagging and sometimes vehement defense of the Bolshevization campaign and of the Canadian section’s new leader, Tim Buck, Buhay consolidated her position in the Party at a critical moment in its history. Her dedication to Buck was exceeded only by her reverence for Stalin, whom she would eulogize as the world’s foremost friend of womankind.

On the theoretical level, party leadership recognized female equality as fundamental, yet from its inception and throughout its heyday in the Depression, the Party gave working and intellectual women scant attention, and persisted in seeing women primarily as wives and mothers, not as workers. In essence, with due regard for such exceptional figures as Kollontai in Russia and Custance in Canada, any form of “radical feminism” explicitly or implicitly challenging the leadership or privileges of male Communists was deemed to be bourgeois, a distraction from the principal duties of all leftists. Social equality for women would eventuate inevitably from a successful proletarian revolution. The sex-based inequality that, since 1921, the CPC had regularly denounced was simply one element in the wider inequalities of
capitalist society that only Communist revolution would cure. The important thing was to work for and support the Party. The wives of working-class men active in the Party were more expected to facilitate their husbands’ political activism than to become involved themselves. Women workers were encouraged to become organized and to become members, and were criticized when they did not. But women with families were largely ignored during the Third Period. Technically, the implications of sexual difference were ignored among members, as all were expected to do their utmost for the Party. This meant that a sort of formal equality reigned among male and female members - one’s value as a member was established through service and self-subordination to class politics. In line with the Comintern emphasis on winning women because they might become war workers in the coming struggle against the Soviet Union, Canadian Communist leaders often thought of women more as potential supporters or saboteurs of male working-class struggles than as potentially valuable Communists in their own right. Hence the CPC’s emphasis on the crucial importance of educating women to become loyal Party supporters. Women, like youth, and indeed like most workers themselves, had to be paternalistically taught to understand the importance of working-class solidarity.39

The Depression made daily family life a difficult and sometimes impossible struggle for many working class families. Forcing hundreds of thousands of male breadwinners out of work, it placed new strain on established gender roles.40 Such a transformation of gender roles could be both frightening and liberating, depending

39 Among Communists of Ukrainian descent, this even took the radical form of male Communists pretending to be women protesting against the backwardness and apathy of their fellow women. See Joan Sangster, “Robitnytsia, Ukrainian Communists, and the ‘Porcupinism’ Debate: Reassessing Ethnicity, Gender, and Class in Early Canadian Communism, 1922-1930,” Labour/Le Travail 56 (Fall 2005) 51-89.

on who, where, and what you were. The conditions of the Depression brought private misery into full public view, and challenged the public/private divide that had kept “good” women at home and out of politics. They sparked intense, far-ranging debates about the role of the state, the policing of the working class, and the regulation of women’s morality.41

Viewed from one perspective, the very Depression that crushed the hopes of so many male workers and prairie farmers brought new opportunities for many women. Working-class women stepped into the breach when their husbands’ jobs evaporated. Collectively, women petitioned authorities for relief, campaigned against political corruption and injustice, and organized consumer boycotts.42 Acting on the basis of such Depression conditions, the CPC politicized family life, organizing with a new intensity on a host of issues hitherto considered part of the private realm. Paradoxically, for all the trauma generated by the Depression, the economic crisis provoked beneficial insights into the centrality of sustenance and security as basic human rights. The Communists, in such campaigns as their struggle for universal and cross-Canada unemployment insurance, were important in bringing them to public attention.

By 1934, homegrown and Moscow-imposed signs of a new “line change” were accumulating. With the Seventh Congress of the Communist International in 1935 the policy of joining with social democratic forces in a Popular Front Against Fascism became official. In the interests of maintaining the Popular Front the Canadian Party reversed many key positions, including those on its work among women. Now no longer regarded as a potential proletarian base worthy of


42 On urban women organizing boycotts, see especially Ruth A. Frager, “Politicized Housewives in the Jewish Communist Movement of Toronto, 1923–1933,” in Linda Kealey and Joan Sangster, eds., Beyond the Vote: Canadian Women and Politics (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 258–75.
organization in their own right (as in the WLL under Custance), nor as a possible
source of armaments workers in a war against the Soviet Union (as in the Third
Period), women -- or, more accurately, “woman” -- became a bridge to all the
progressive and democratic groups the Party hoped to unite against Fascism. With
the formation of the Popular Front Against Fascism at the 1935 CI convention in
Moscow, the working and middle classes were fighting for the same thing -- family
and nation -- against a common, fascist enemy.

Party discussions of the woman question during the Popular Front in the
period 1935 to 1945 were not about representing working-class women but about
representing to them the idealized forms of Soviet working-class womanhood, which
were then projected on to readings of Canadian realities, both past and present.
From the class-conscious woman imagined by Custance, with her challenge to the
prevailing order of the family, and from the class-conscious female worker of the
Third Period, who longed for the general revolution that would end her oppression,
one passed over to the figure of the Communist, peace-loving, family-serving mother.
As the embodiment of honour and goodness, the centre of family and social order,
this motherly Woman stood as an indictment of class exploitation and inequality.

***

Even the foregoing, largely descriptive account of the CPC and women is
certain to provoke controversy. Almost everything about the Communists does. Two
decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the commencement of the break-up of
the Soviet Union, Communism is still a bitterly-contested terrain among many
scholars.
The literature contains well-rehearsed positions and conventionalized debates.
Underlying many of them, particularly in the United States, are the intellectual habits and preconceptions of the Cold War. Among general studies of Communism, one can find many examples of its treatment as an inherently totalitarian form. Stalin's enormities were, it is argued, anticipated by Lenin's manifestos and were perhaps even implicit in Marx's economics. On the other side, we find less hostile interpretations that critically interpret the world communist movement as a continuing radical socialist tradition—admittedly one that was often contradictory, prone to excess, and tragically misled by Stalin. Hostile interpreters see communism as a crime against humanity; those sympathetic to its goals if not all its methods see it as a complex if flawed response to persisting problems of creating new forms of democracy in the modern age.

One perennial debate that reflects this underlying cleavage is especially evident in the United States. In this dichotomous stand-off, “traditionalists” who portray Communists as members of parties that were so Soviet-dominated that they often amounted to little more than tools of Stalin’s state are pitted against “revisionists” who emphasize the autonomy and ideological flexibility of grassroots Communists. The release of substantial amounts of new material on Soviet spies, many of them active in Communist parties, has re-energized this dichotomized discussion, which in essence goes back to the first post-1918 Red Scare. Historians influenced by Trotsky’s analysis of the Soviet Union have often tended to align themselves with the traditionalists, with the significant caveat that they attribute the slavish subordination of the Communist parties to the “Stalinism” that arose throughout the movement after the dictator’s assumption of near-absolute power in

---

1928, a transition that represented the tragic “Thermidorian” betrayal of Lenin’s and Trotsky’s revolution. Both sorts of traditionalists emphasize the Communists’ slavish subordination to Moscow. Conversely, “revisionists” are those impressed by Communist contributions to the Civil Rights, peace and trade-union movements, among many others, all of which suggested a high degree of political creativity, tactical flexibility and even ideological subtlety in day-to-day politics. They particularly emphasize the ways in which Communists linked grassroots struggles to Marxist politics, in the most powerful organization ever seen on the twentieth-century U.S. left.

The risk of essentialism on both sides has been considerable. One could either say that the “essence” of Communism was subservience to the Stalin regime and spying on its behalf or that its “essence” lay in the spirited and courageous men and women suffused with a democratic spirit who mounted union organizing drives and fought Jim Crow. The truth, as Ellen Schrecker deftly suggests, may be a paradoxical one. That is, the Communist Party may have been both a sect tragically linked to a despotic and murderous regime and the party in which honest citizens enrolled in a highly effective and empowering movement. Rather than boiling the Party down to one position or the other, the historian’s task is to see how, paradoxically, they might both be true.

There is much polemically, but little intellectually, to be gained by reducing Communist Parties to one or the other ‘essence.’ No one who writes of the CPC

---


47 See, for example, Maurice Isserman, Which Side Were You On? The American Communist Party During the Second World War (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1982).


49 One might also note that both sides have a tendency to talk past each other. For the traditionalists, the only really important issues are those that relate to the foreign policy stands taken by the Communist parties—which were, after 1926, predictably, almost invariably carbon copies of the
can dispute the direct influence of the Comintern, and hence (indirectly) of Stalin, over the Party. By 1930 Stalin’s demand for a ‘great break’ with bourgeois culture was influential in every national party. And, as Sheila Fitzpatrick notes, this call for a general cultural revolution was intimately tied to his drive to consolidate party, and ultimately his own, rule.50 At the same time, only the most hostile interpretation could dispute the extent to which grassroots Communists strenuously fought for democratic rights, operated often imaginatively and ingeniously on local terrains, and made many decisions without consulting Moscow.51 That the “cultural revolution” launched in Moscow had tangled roots does not necessarily invalidate the initiatives that Canadian Communists launched in its wake. Moreover, one must remember the demographic peculiarities of the Canadian Party. Located in the least densely populated country in the world, the Canadian Party was overwhelmingly made up of men and women of Finnish, Ukrainian, and Jewish descent. The “Stalinist” image of a monolithic party slavishly answerable to a Moscow-driven central committee may have been plausible on paper -- indeed the Party dutifully filed detailed reports for the approval, and often disapproval, of its superiors in Russia. It was also, necessarily, a fiction. Only a small minority of Communists could converse in their native language with the Party’s Toronto headquarters. Many were attached to the movement principally via ethnic cultural ties (no matter what the official status of the ‘language federations’). Local leaders separated from head office by thousands of miles were necessarily required to make many decisions on the ground. A stubborn,

“Moscow Line.” For the revisionists, the only really important issues are those that relate to the domestic stands taken by Communist parties -- which were often influenced by Moscow’s abstract requirements, but then interpreted and implemented on the local level in a creative, even individualistic way.50 Sheila Fitzpatrick argues that Stalin’s attacks on bourgeois culture were attacks on pre-revolutionary authority in everything from culture to technology. They aimed to establish that the Party both represented and even embodied the Soviet workers and their interests. The CPSU’s identification with the Soviet working class, coupled with its absolute control of the state, justified its claim that workers’ hegemony was synonymous with Party control. Sheila Fitzpatrick, The Russian Revolution, 3rd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). See also Matthew Worley, “For a Proletarian Culture: Communist Party Culture in Britain in the Third Period, 1928–35,” Socialist History, 18 (2000): 70–91.

seemingly incorrigible rank-and-file intransigence was noted to be a trait of many rank-and-file Canadian Communists -- even when they were part of the collective and disciplined military effort in Spain.\textsuperscript{52} They struck many Communists from elsewhere as bearing clear signs of individualism.

Although the Cold War echoes are still discernible, especially in much U.S. writing, the overall historiography on Communism has changed remarkably over the past twenty years. In part, this development can be traced to the opening up of new archival sources. Once one of the world’s most secretive bodies, the Comintern has become one of its most public. The release of thousands of Comintern files in the 1990s and their availability on microfilm has presented historians with a vast new collection of documents, ones that supplement the often patchy archival deposits of such parties as the CPC.\textsuperscript{53} Although never entirely accessible and often restricted for opaque reasons, police files in Canada offer another example of a suddenly abundant resource for historians of left movements.\textsuperscript{54}

Yet the remarkable transformation of Communist historiography owes as much to new theoretical emphases as it does to new documentary sources. The end of the Cold War and its associated polemics have allowed for a more measured and

\textsuperscript{52} See Michel Petrou, Renegades: Canadians in the Spanish Civil War (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2008), 43.


holistic approach to the Russian Revolution and the parties in Western Europe and North America inspired by it. In the new dispensation, it is possible to consider international Communism as much a cultural as a political phenomenon, and probe its contributions to and critiques of interwar modernity.

Although the Canadian historiography has not fully embraced the new approach, it is starting to make its impact here as well. A particularly important field of inquiry has been that of probing ways in which Communists from ethnic minority backgrounds struggled collectively and individually with the burdens and possibilities of juggling the not-always-easily-reconciled subject-positions of

---


nationality, race, class, gender, sexuality and ‘Canadianism.’ The field of left women’s history has been no less transformed. So has the study of Communists’ attempts to shape the lives of children. Left-wing positions on sexuality are also receiving new attention.

It is also becoming increasingly evident that addressing parties like the interwar CPC in its gender dimensions requires a transnational perspective, since the horizons of the “Soldiers of the International” were by definition not confined to Canada. Depression conditions forced leftists in Canada to confront a globalized capitalist world, arguably with an intensity rarely experienced before. New immigration restrictions not only barred the way to Canada for many aspiring residents, but posed divisive issues for the Canadian labour movement.

Contemporary leftists in Canada lived the Spanish Civil War as though it were happening next door — the strengthening Fascism it demonstrated seemed an

---


ominous indication of the shape of future politics in Canada. Correspondents in Spain brought the conflict home to the readers of urban newspapers. And hundreds went to fight, and some to die, in the conflict — which represented, by some informed accounts, a high point of direct Comintern influence throughout the world communist movement. In a different way, rank-and-file leftists in Canada, especially those from minority ethnic backgrounds, were forced to reckon with the very real possibility that their continued lives in Canada might be peremptorily terminated. Deportation was used aggressively as a tool by the Bennett regime. Both the “securely documented” and the “precariously deportable” leftists in Canada lived in a world in which national boundaries were both increasingly powerful and equally nebulous. Thus, to frame inquiries about the success or failure of Communists in exclusively national terms, or to question the sincerity or quality of their patriotism, is to miss important dimensions about who they were and what they wanted to accomplish.

If the new literature has moved beyond the dichotomies of traditionalist / revisionist debates, it has also tended to transcend the class reductionism implicit in much writing on the Party. A tendency among many traditional writers on the CP was to assume, as Communists did themselves, that its historical significance lay in

---

its being a party of the industrial working class, narrowly defined. This class-
reductionist emphasis does indeed convey something of the CPC’s idealized version
of itself, as enunciated forcibly in its revolutionary trade unionism of its Third
Period. Yet it had the scholarly consequence of making the history of the CPC the
territory of labour historians, and led to the Party’s marginalization by most other
Canadian scholars, even those who write about the Depression. A Party that never
took power can easily be sidelined in many interpretations of Canadian history. It
can be made to seem a topic suitable only for extremely specialized students of
labour history.

Yet, as I shall argue in this thesis, a paradox of the Third Period and then the
Popular Front was that the Party actually sought to win influence far beyond the
working class. In the early 1930s, while continuing to organize on the basis of class
war, the CPC responded to crisis conditions by turning its attention to the home
front and the unemployed. (Anti-eviction struggles were prominent examples of the
latter campaigns). No longer focusing exclusively on the worker (male or female), the
CP gradually moved to incorporate every aspect of working-class life within its
organizing scope.

Evidence for this can be found in the efflorescence of the Young Communist
League, a body that did not require one to be a party member in order to join. In the
early 1930s the Young Communist League (YCL) and the CPC attracted new
members in record numbers. Among the new members were bourgeois students,
artists and intellectuals, some of whom formed the Party’s first Progressive Arts Club
in Toronto in 1931. To an unusual extent for CPC-related ventures, the PAC has
received considerable attention, if not so much from mainstream Canadian
historians, then at least from other scholars of Canadian culture. More than the
YCL or the Party itself, the PACs provided those trained and talented in cultural
work a home within the working-class movement. With the formation of the PACs
the Party opened a cultural front against capitalism and broadened its social basis. Close attention to the YCL and to the PACs, with their creative experiments in literary modernism, new styles of theatre, and even novel approaches to education and art, will take us further and further away from seeing the Communist movement as one that can be entirely understood as Moscow’s cipher.

***

This new “cultural” approach to the history of Canadian Communism will undoubtedly change our understanding of the history of Communist women. Analysts of the Left in North America have described the work of activists such as the Canadian Beckie Buhay and the American Ella Reeve Bloor (widely known as “Mother Bloor”) as socialist feminist. Accounts such as Joan Sangster’s Dreams of Equality and Kate Weigand’s Red Feminism argue that women’s contributions were important to the CP’s successes, and that female activists injected their work with feminist vision and objectives. On the other hand, as we have seen, Janice Newton criticizes the early twentieth-century Canadian Left for what she sees as its failure to take up the feminist challenge. This dissertation steers between these approaches. My focus is on gender and sexuality as formative elements in the struggle to gain authority and legitimacy for the CPC’s class politics.

Sangster’s Dreams of Equality, Women on the Canadian Left, 1920-1950 (1989) has long been a definitive text on women and socialism in the interwar period in Canada. Sangster provides an excellent overview of women’s place in the Communist movement during the Party’s heyday. She notes that the Canadian Left reflected the social conservatism of Canada in the 1930s. ‘The woman question’ was not, she argues, a priority for the Canadian left. The attention the ‘Question’ received within the CPC derived mainly from Comintern instructions and the exemplary socialist
feminism of early Party women, among whom Florence Custance, Annie Buller, and Beckie Buhay were particularly important. Sangster describes the Party’s attitude toward women in working-class politics as generally dismissive and its efforts in organizing women as underfunded and sporadic. Nonetheless, she concludes that insofar as it recognized ‘the woman question’ as legitimate (if intractable) the CPC did lead the Canadian Left on the issue of women’s equality. My differences from Sangster’s work are ones of emphasis and implication.

Sangster provides an evocative account of the Party’s most successful work among women: she characterizes this as “militant mothering” around bread and prices, the issues most relevant to the majority of women affiliated with the CPC, who were wives and mothers. Sangster gives her readers the theoretical background to the CPC’s attitude toward women, and elucidates the contradictory qualities of the Party’s approach to educating and organizing them. As a party designed to represent and lead workers, its focus was on industrial workers. Wage labour remained the basis of its organizational work. One could conclude that this emphasis meant that the Party would take little interest in women who worked in the home. Women as waged workers, not women who were outside the waged economy, would have constituted the CPC’s primary focus in its activism on the ‘Question’. But Sangster points out that even in its most militant periods, the CPC did indeed recognize, if at times only negatively, the importance of women in the home. (Their “backwardness,” for instance, was a perennial worry). It enjoyed more success in organizing women’s auxiliaries than in unionizing working women.

Sangster argues that the politics practised by women such as Beckie Buhay, Margaret Fairley, Bella Hall Gauld and other female luminaries of the Canadian left was an early form of socialist feminism, even as they emphatically eschewed feminism per se and argued for sexual equality as an integral yet dependent element of socialism. Although they did not describe their positions as “feminist,” they
certainly battled sexism, both in and outside the CPC. With respect to Communist women’s battles for equality, Sangster notes that several prominent CPC women were well aware of sex-based subordination. She reads back into the 1930s a consciousness of gender identity as crucial in women’s political, social and cultural engagement. This dissertation takes the view that this consciousness was not in fact formative for women’s political orientation and activism until later.

Sangster notes that the Women’s Bureau of the CPC was established in response to urging from the International Women’s Secretariat of the CI. “Soviet reforms in marriage, divorce, and abortion laws fostered similar debates in Canada,” she argues, “opening up women’s issues that had rarely been discussed by the prewar socialist movement, and indeed, were rarely discussed in the subsequent history of the Communist Party.” Sangster connects the end of serious attention to the woman question within the CPC to Stalin’s expanding control of the international Communist movement. She portrays the influence of the Soviet Union and the CI in bringing the woman question to the fore during the 1920s, and sweeping it under the carpet unresolved during the 1930s, and recognizes the formative role of Soviet influence in shaping the Canadian Party’s policies affecting women. In the final analysis, however, Sangster puts greater emphasis on the tenacity and persistence of “dreams of equality” among Canadian CP women, who continued to work for feminist goals after these no longer enjoyed official sanction.

Sangster’s discussion of the woman question and the Canadian left is among the most focused and detailed works on the topic. Her emphasis is on the impact women made on socialist politics in Canada. She starts from the premise that “[r]etrieving the history of women socialists is ... an important task for contemporary socialist-feminists if we are to understand what historical conditions encourage, or

---

68 Sangster, Dreams of Equality 28.
stifle, women’s radicalism.” Sangster sets out to establish not only the presence of women in the socialist movement, but the distinctly socialist-feminist aspect of their commitment and expectations. That is, they consciously connected socialism with the establishment of sexual equality. Her emphasis is on what women did for and with socialist politics in Canada, and sheforegrounds women’s agency while also discussing the challenges they faced in the movement, primarily the lack of detailed attention to and analysis on the woman question in socialist/Marxist theory, and the general tolerance for sex-based inequality within the CPC and throughout Canadian society at the time.

In her conclusion Sangster mentions the importance of linguistic and cultural mediations in shaping women’s consciousness and agency as active members of the Canadian left. She does not, however, include a critical discussion of culture or language in her argument. Her approach to the period is rather to recapture the voices of women in the movement. She aims to recapture the part women played in socialist politics, a part that has been overlooked in most histories of the Canadian Left. Sangster mentions the importance of trying to regain the sense of what their work meant to them, both in the context of the time and of their own lives as women. According to Sangster, the idea of women’s agency has largely been written out of histories of the Canadian Left, many of which have emphasized the organizational and theoretical levels of socialist movement. For Sangster, the issue of women’s oppression is foremost, and the objective of her work is to show the diverse ways socialist women actively worked against this oppression and fought for sexual equality. Sangster’s critical assessment is shaped by the view of women’s oppression characteristic of the socialist feminist critique that developed fully with the later women’s liberation movement. She has not projected this back on to the earlier period, but has assessed its shortcomings in light of it.

---

69 Sangster, Dreams of Equality 8-9.
In this dissertation I do not criticize or deny Sangster’s argument on the agency of radical women in the socialist movement in Canada. Like Sangster, I consider the historical and structural aspects of the period in tandem. Yet, whereas Sangster foregrounds women’s agency, my emphasis is on developing a historical and critical reading of the discursive position of women in the CPC during the 1930s. Going beyond the recovery of women’s voices and agencies, I want to explore how the ideas and effects of gender shaped women’s work in the movement. The discursive substance of the woman question changed in and for the CPC in the 1930s. The implementation of the CPC’s changing line was a gendered phenomenon. It affected women differently than it did men. This development can be most clearly seen with respect to the definition of class and its boundaries, but its gendered impact can also be discerned in constructions of age and ethnicity. Both line changes -- that to the Third Period in 1928/9 and that to the Popular Front in 1934/5 -- can be interpreted as moments that empowered some Communists and disempowered others. Distinct groups within the Party -- workers, wives, working and middle-class women, for example -- were taken up and involved in a discursive dynamic that they themselves did not fully shape or control. Once within the Party, members were expected to speak its language and respect its axioms.

In *Dreams of Equality*, there is no analysis of the many ways that the CPC drew on a grammar of gender to support and rationalize its political work. As Sangster notes, sexual morality and gender norms within the Party reflected those of Canadian society. Yet, this thesis argues, their operation was not simply reflective -- it was formative. The Party did not passively reflect the society around it. It selected and transformed and put to work elements of that society’s discursive repertoire. In contrast to Sangster’s focus on what women did in the CPC, on how their “dreams of equality” fared, this thesis explores how the Party first marginalized women and the family and then embraced them -- in highly selective ways, and with very specific
political effects. There is no doubt that the CPC’s efforts to involve women in the movement were impeded by representations, held by those both outside and within the Party, that defined women’s “essential” femininity as passive, nature-bound, maternal, nurturing and bucolic, and men’s “essential” masculinity as active, transcendent, patriarchal, forceful and future-oriented. Yet these were neither “just there” for the Party to pick up, nor were they “static” passive objects merely reflected in the limitations of the Party. The Party had to select, reconstruct, and apply particular ideas and ideals about gender. This was an active process. It entailed not just the local interpretation of the Comintern line, but a more general construction of ‘woman’ and ‘man’ in Communist discourse, and in the everyday world of grassroots activists. In the Party literature and press, the feminine is conceived as balanced and healthy insofar as it complements and corresponds to working-class masculinity. The dual functioning of feminine as counterpart and opposite meant that ‘feminine’ operated as both a positive and negative concept in defining working-class masculinity, in ways that sustained and extended masculine privilege and sexual inequality. Consciousness of the linguistic dimensions of the CPC’s history of women takes us into territory only partly explored by Sangster’s admirable work.

The publication of Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women’s Liberation in 2001 was the first significant addition to the historiography of women and American communism in almost a decade. Kate Weigand introduced a challenging reinterpretation of the CPUSA’s relation to the development of feminism in the women’s liberation movement. Weigand argues that following the Second World War, as the marginalization of Communists and all identified with them intensified, a small group of prominent female activists articulated a new and explicitly feminist form of analysis. They did so as members of, not rebels against, the CPUSA. They thus effected an integration of gender with a new understanding
of racial, ethnic, and class difference, and opened a new chapter in the CPUSA’s already considerable work on the Woman Question. Weigand argues that the CPUSA’s earlier (1930s) recognition of racial inequality as a distinct aspect of oppression was the basis for this feminist work on the interaction of racial, class and gender inequality that emerged amongst (primarily female) activists within the CPUSA. This work was subsequently re-discovered in the sixties and seventies and had a formative effect on the development of the women’s liberation movement.

Weigand’s argument is intriguing and innovative. Her portrayal of the handling of the woman question by the CPUSA focuses on the work of several leading women: Mary Inman, Claudia Jones, Eleanor Flexner, and Eve Merriam among them. Her discussion of their work is informative and effective in bringing out the sophistication and depth of their analysis. Yet Weigand describes their work in broad terms, and in doing so, obscures the degree to which CPUSA policy and leadership reflected (or even endorsed) these writers’ views on women and gender, and the relation of sexual equality to the CPUSA’s working class politics. Weigand’s argument that the work done by Mary Inman, Claudia Jones, and others was an early blossoming of socialist feminism is convincing, yet she does not conclusively show that this work was representative of the CPUSA itself.70 Weigand does show, convincingly, that these prominent members were actively engaged with and extensively debated the Woman Question, and that their work spoke to the interests and concerns of women in a subsequent political formation.

Weigand writes that women such as Gerda Lerner and Eve Merriam “did not simply resurrect the radical feminist thinking of the 1910s. They revolutionized it by conceptualizing the dynamics of women’s oppression and liberation within a

---

70 Rosalyn Baxandall disputes Weigand’s claim that the CPUSA underwent a sea change in its policy and orientation on the issue of sex and sexuality following World War II. She commends Weigand’s work, but does not agree that the CPUSA embraced the feminist analysis undertaken by some of its leading female members. Baxandall notes that in fact, their views had very little impact on the wider CPUSA in the 1930s. Rosalyn Baxandall, “Precursors and Bridges: Was the CPUSA Unique?,” Science and Society 66 (2002-2003): 500-505.
framework that made race and class central. They sustained a small but vibrant women’s movement through the 1940s and 1950s and transmitted influential terminology, tactics, and concepts to the next generation of feminists.”\textsuperscript{71} This claim reflects the gist of Weigand’s effort: to connect the flowering of the women’s liberation movement in the late 1960s to the American communist movement as it peaked in the 1940s and declined in the 1950s. While Weigand’s assessment of the hold of feminism within and on the CPUSA itself needs more support and development to be fully convincing, her argument that the work of feminists within the CPUSA was a formative element in the subsequent development of the women’s liberation movement seems indisputable.

Van Gosse argues that the CPUSA underwent a dramatic shift in policy between 1930 and 1934, a process that saw the American socialist movement return to an earlier politics of familial solidarity in which women, children and family were important. He describes this as a shift in which the CPUSA awoke to its own historical contingency, a period in which the Party, the most important force on the U.S. left in this period, made itself more relevant to many Americans by responding to the actual devastation workers and their families were experiencing in the early 1930s: “Over the summer and fall of 1930, the grassroots survival actions of many desperate men and women, including local communists without any direction from their Party, and the belated recognition by the leadership of the gap between its practice and what the working class needed, overdetermined a conjuncture in which Communists transformed themselves, beyond any direction from on high.”\textsuperscript{72} This attention to the pragmatic needs of American workers (as opposed to a “scientific” insistence upon its vanguard role with respect to educating them) was the basis for

\textsuperscript{71} Kate Weigand, \textit{Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women’s Liberation} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 3.
\textsuperscript{72} Van Gosse, "'To Organize in Every Neighbourhood, in Every Home': the Gender Politics of American Communists between the Wars," \textit{Radical History Review} (1991), 128.
the Party’s successes in the Popular Front, the heyday of the CPUSA’s relevance as a force in the United States.

One of the most significant aspects of Gosse’s argument is his account of when the shift began. By showing that the turn toward a more populist style of addressing workers, and a more practical emphasis on the everyday needs of the working class began in the summer of 1930 – with Max Bedacht’s speech to the Seventh CPUSA Congress – Gosse greatly complicates the general view that throughout the 1930s the CPUSA acted entirely under the direction of the CI and CPSU, and also the more particular view that the Third Period was a wholesale disaster for all concerned. He Americanizes the movement, and links its effectiveness to American conditions and American initiative. This is a significant point to make, and given the deep links between the Canadian and American movements, it carries profound implications for this thesis. 73

The proportion of women in the CPC remained quite low – by one estimate, about 12 per cent in 1935 (a drop from 14 to 15 per cent in previous years). 74 The number of women who were CPC members probably never exceeded 800 in the period covered by this thesis. (As we have seen, the post-1928 Party was focused intently on industrial workers, and women were only sometimes identified as such). Yet it would be a mistake to think that the Party’s ideology incapacitated it as a force capable of speaking to women in many places and social strata. The Party was a movement geared to transforming every aspect of society, from the most intimate aspects of family life to the most public matters of political and economic power. It had the potential to speak powerfully to women on many issues, ranging from the

73 Not only were the leading political members of the CPC in close touch with the U.S. CP leadership. Key members of the CPC also briefly lived and worked in New York, and visited the city regularly. This meant that the Canadian movement was deeply and directly affected by American Communist culture and politics. One might even say that the Canadian Communist movement was guided as much by U.S. example as by Soviet control. (Of course, both the CPC and the CPUSA were themselves responsive to the positions taken up by the Comintern).

price of bread to the regulation of sexuality. Any woman who might feel “womanhood” to be a limitation or who confronted the stubborn realities of “women’s work” could find something of interest in the Party’s representations. And there is substantial evidence, especially from the big cities, that many women were responsive to the CPC’s message and were willing to participate in its campaigns.

In the interests of maintaining the Popular Front the Canadian Party reversed many key positions, including those on its work among women. In the Popular Front, women – or more accurately “woman” – would become the bridge upon which the Party joined forces with antifascist and social democratic groups. Following the formation of the Popular Front Against Fascism at the 1935 CI convention in Moscow, the working and middle-classes were urged to unite in defense of the progressive family and nation.

This constituted a profound political, practical and discursive transformation of the gendered meaning and significance of ‘Communism.’

The change was vividly apparent in the post-1935 transformation with respect to representations of women and family in the Communist press. The major English-language papers — The Worker and then its successor after 1 May 1936, the Daily Clarion — began to feature photographs of radio actresses and movie stars, as the mass culture of Hollywood slowly but surely shaped the language and symbolism of the Popular Front. Stories of high romance were inserted along with discussions of international anti-fascism and scientific socialism. Socialist women became “everywoman” — appearing in the pages of the communist press as workers, mothers and wives, professionals and even movie stars.

Thus ideas about women and womanhood changed over the course of the decade, from class-conscious wife and mother in the united front from below to the class-

75 For an important study of CCF women and the Popular Front in Toronto, see John Manley, "Women and the Left in the 1930s: The Case of the Toronto CCF Women’s Joint Committee," Atlantis, 5 (1980): 100-19.
conscious woman worker during the Third Period. In the era of the Popular Front Against Fascism, the class-conscious mother again emerged as the reigning symbol of working-class womanhood, but this time, she did not come forward as a projection from a time in which, as Kollontai had urged, women would be liberated from the compulsory burdens of the family by a progressive proletarian state. Rather, she stepped forward as an image of working-class traditionalism, the veritable embodiment of honour and goodness, the centre of family and social order. Although still a figure indicting class exploitation and inequality, she was not now the embodiment of the imagined future but of an idealized working-class past. Engels’s historicization of the patriarchal family as central to capitalism was not forgotten, but set to one side, as not just the proletarian family was idealized— but the family itself.

As the Popular Front developed the Party increasingly relied on familial metaphors, which conveyed ideals of a gendered order based on distinct masculine and feminine spheres of interest and ability. The Depression had made living up to these ideals increasingly difficult for working-class families, and there were powerful forces of modernity that made them seem less and less like the permanent, stable foundations of social order. Once the CPC had given some prominence to voices like that of Custance that had implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, critiqued such representations. Now they were not only passively “reflected” in CPC discourse but positively selected out, reinforced, and acted upon— within a party increasingly involved in a thorough-going attempt to reach out to Canadians and transform their understandings of life in a class society. Within this Popular Front framework sexual difference was used as a metaphor for activism versus passivity, manliness versus effeminacy, a broad humanism versus a narrow feminism, public interest versus private interest. Working-class women were lauded as valuable members of their class insofar as they identified with the positive elements of this dialectic. The CPC’s
shift aligned with that found in the Soviet Union itself. Commentators on Soviet history have argued that Stalin re-ordered the Party's relation to the Soviet population to that of a family, in which citizens were treated as children who depended on the leadership of a strong father (Stalin and the Party) and the love of a strong mother (the Russian nation and the Russian past).76 Stalin was father to his own nation and to the international working class.77 The CPC obviously passively “received” this image through its links to the Comintern. Yet it also actively “reworked” the language of patriarchy implicit within it, making it axiomatic to its post-1935 praxis. The challenges to party leadership posed by diversity — of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, race and class — were controlled by claiming for the Party, for the working-class, and by extension, for all progressive Canadians, the moral and political prerogatives of an immense family. The post-1935 CP did not challenge the paternalistic organization of the family itself. Instead it presented an idealized working-class family as the template of a new social organization. This was a popular

77 As Canadian Communists were told in 1953, on the occasion of Stalin’s death: “Words cannot express the heartfelt, profound grief of the Soviet peoples — for they had lost a father, a man who embodied in his person everything they held dear — their Communist Party, their ever-increasing well-being, their future in a society each would receive according to his needs. He stood for peace, for the plans that were changing the face of their great land, making it yield its riches for man’s greed. And as they grieved, they swore a new oath — that Stalin’s great vision of a world living in peace, in brotherhood, in happiness and abundance for all, would be realized.” “His name will endure through the ages and so will his work,” The Canadian Tribune, 16 March 1953. Another Communist, Sonya Morris, eulogized Father Stalin even more poetically in her poem “My Comrade Stalin,” Canadian Tribune, 23 March 1953:

“Sleep, our teacher, leader,
the most precious friend we have...
Millions see your dear, familiar face,
you read your wise, inspiring words —
read and engrave them in their hearts and minds,
Sleep, my brother, my father, my gentle Comrade Stalin
—YOU are spring!”

One should note that the parameters of “Stalin’s family” were flexible. For instance, Stalin became known as “Uncle Joe” during the Second World War, a designation that suggested his friendly collaboration with other world leaders, his disavowal of control over the international communist movement, and so on. For Stalin’s avuncular image, see Simon Sebag Montefiore, Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar (London: Phoenix, 2004), 447. For the widespread acceptance of the image of “Uncle Joe” among British Communists, see Alison Macleod, The Death of Uncle Joe. (Woodbridge: Merlin Press, 1997). For a more general discussion of gender ideology under Stalin, see Susan Reid, “All Stalin’s Women: Gender and Power in Soviet Art of the 1930s.” Slavic Review 57, no. 1 (Spring 1998), 133-173.
idea among a working class that held, in many ways, to traditional ideas and for whom a traditional family structure of mutual support was far more important than women's equality.

The Party politicized family life and made the revolutionary point that sustenance and security of home are basic rights, not the privilege of the wealthy and fortunate. Van Gosse's work has emphasized this fact particularly effectively in the U.S. context. It is important that this development be grasped in all its complexity. The politicization of the family as practiced by the Party, especially after 1935, was organized around a romantic and traditionally gendered model of family life. This model, although it challenged the division between public and private, retained the association of women with their role in the family, with support and self-sacrifice. This model politicized the previously “private” work done by women, yet retained the sexual division of labour. Even as the Party recognized the public significance of women’s work in the family, it continued to view this labour as synonymous with women, and to view women’s “natural” labour as reproductive. Mothering (as labour, not childbirth) could be publicly recognized, but the conviction that it was women’s work remained unchallenged within the CPC. By repeatedly citing the paternalistic family as the metaphor for Stalin’s relation to the working class the Party borrowed from bourgeois symbols of authority and order. These notions -- the conventions and daily practices of gender -- had been deeply challenged by Depression conditions. Instead of seizing an opportunity to develop new norms and different

---

78 That is to say, there is a critical difference between this line of interpretation and Van Gosse's thesis that the turn to the Popular Front merely “expanded” the pre-existing and narrow conception of class politics to encompass the working-class family as a site of politicization and struggle. The new framework did not simply "expand" the CPC’s imagination to include the working-class family, seen as an “obvious” pre-existing reality. Rather, it re-imagined, in an essentially reactionary and anti-modern way, what the idealized working-class family, and indeed the family in general, ought to be. Thus, I do not agree with Gosse’s argument when he describes the coexistence of ‘macho bolshevism’ and revolutionary maternalism as contradictory. He emphasizes that the politicization of mothering and family life gave women a place in the movement they had been denied throughout the 1920s. But the Party's recognition of the political significance of personal circumstances was an expansion of its political sphere, within which the traditional associations of motherhood with nurturing and security were used to indict capitalism and its state apparatus. Rather than a contradiction, this view of women as heroic victims of a heartless capitalism who are rallied to fight back against the system in defence of their husbands and children complements macho Bolshevism.
concepts of the family, in ways congruent with Engels’s historicization of family life in the nineteenth century or Kollontai’s revolutionary conceptions of the 1920s, the CPC assessed the crisis of the family in the Depression as further evidence of capitalism’s decline.

***

Understanding this discursive shift requires types of theorization and empirical research that have only emerged over the past two decades, as feminists (who made it possible seriously to apply gender as a category of historical analysis) and other cultural theorists have wrestled with the history of the left. Only slowly has their work been incorporated as new strategies for the exploration of left history. One line of analysis important for this thesis, derived from the work of Antonio Gramsci, is Ian McKay’s concept of “reconnaissance.” Originating in work on the logic of Canadian history as one of liberal order, reconnaissance has since been applied to the history of the Canadian left. A persisting liberal and capitalist order imposes limitations and imparts important lessons to successive cohorts of leftists who seek to resist it. The strategy of reconnaissance entails an epistemological and ethical transformation in the writing of left history. It urges socialist scholars to probe each past leftism to uncover its rational core and its characteristic answers to the recurrent problems posed by the political and economic order. Shaped by distinctive, world-changing “matrix-events,” each socialist formation – a network of

---


words and things predicated upon a given vision of “living otherwise” — is “a kind of experiment in post-liberalism.” Rather than analyzing the shortcomings in the spirit of getting right what past socialists presumably got wrong, reconnaissance recommends that left historians undertake a ‘horizontal’ approach to studying and reconstructing these formations, one that will enable historians to uncover their strengths as well as vulnerabilities. It also recommends a close attention to language, specifically noting how socialist movements used distinctive concepts and images to engage with hegemonic values and ideas in the interest of changing them. Each formation “has to learn how to speak a ‘common sense’ that the majority of people can identify with.” With respect to the revolutionary formation, that which took the Russian Revolution as its template for the struggle for a post-liberal democracy, theorized a ‘revolutionary praxis’ and focused specifically on the vanguard role of the CP and Comintern, the provisional estimation of this school is that the CPC’s greatest significance was between its formation in 1921 and 1937, the year the Popular Front attained its full dimensions in Canada.

My argument in subsequent chapters, in contrast, is that the transition from the Third Period into the Popular Front made the CPC much more relevant as a political and cultural presence. It was not that its logic was weakened with the shift to the Popular Front and the recognition of family as a key site of political consciousness and mobilization. The weakness that was introduced in the shift from the Third Period to the Popular Front was the CPC’s embrace of the conventional bourgeois model of family, a static notion of family based on definitive opposition between masculine and feminine roles. With this, the CPC placed the family outside history. The Party politicized the domestic role of women, but while it had

---

81 McKay, “For a New Kind of History,” 79.
82 Ian McKay, Rebels, Reds, Radicals: Rethinking Canada’s Left History (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2005), 86-87.
83 Some will object to this point, arguing that the view that women were defined by the reproductive role was universal (and justified by the absence of effective contraception). However, as McKay has pointed out in Reasoning Otherwise, socialist feminists (male and female) in the first formation
previously downplayed women’s role in the family, it now privileged this as definitive of and for women *per se*. Women were empowered by the CPC’s focus on the family, but instead of analyzing the impact of the Depression on the roles of men and women within the family, it used the breakdown of the traditional family and traditional sex-based roles as a basis for its criticism of capitalism. In the deployment of Popular Front politics on the Canadian Left, the strengths of the CPC fully flourished – its intervention in the daily battles against eviction and for adequate relief, its cultural work aimed at informing and entertaining audiences (needful of both), its organization of mass demonstrations against persistent liberal oversight and forbearance, and generally its ‘mass’ work.

My reading of the gist of this communist formation, and specifically the meaning of the transition to the Popular Front, is quite different, then, than that provisionally put forward by reconnaissance. At the same time, it is not generally incompatible with the strategy and has been influenced by its call for a close attention to the languages of politics and the specific axioms that guide political formations. While the CPC certainly relinquished its vanguard relation (or rather, its claim to a vanguard relation) to the Canadian left after 1935, the Popular Front period was not a diminution of its presence, but a transformation in its orientation to Canadians in which the Party’s influence was less explicit but effectively stronger. My different reading of the impact and formative effect of the CPC over the course of this crucial decade reflects my narrower focus on the CPC, specifically in terms of two related elements of the Party’s work reconnaissance has thus far not addressed: cultural work and the recruitment/deployment of middle-class members. In contrast to Ian McKay’s emphasis on horizontal analysis as yielding insight into the broad formation and functionality of earlier socialist movements, my analysis of the CPC is focused on specific members who brought specific skills and particular interests to

approached the question of women’s work as historical and contextual. Also, the Third Period emphasis on women workers involved an implicit notion of sexual roles and relations as historical.
their involvement in the Party. My concern is to understand the ways in which issues of gender and sexuality fundamentally shaped their involvement in an organization that downplayed and largely discredited personal factors. This focus on individual members, on the ways the CPC enfranchised particular middle class women during the Popular Front, illuminates the ways that gender, sexuality, and class were linked within the world of the CPC, the ways in which these elements variously limited and licensed their work as CP members.

Gosse argues that with this shift the Party became increasingly aware of the importance of women’s work and their gendered roles as wives and mothers, and so more aware of gender as a significant political relation. My view is that this renewed awareness of and focus on family and private life as politically important reflected a strategic incorporation of sexual difference in the American party’s work, rather than a thoroughgoing acknowledgment amongst the leadership of sexual difference as a medium of political oppression and a sufficient basis for organization against inequality. Gosse stops short of arguing that the CP leadership thoroughly incorporated an awareness of and attention to gendered inequality to its political perspective. He notes “that it would be false to suggest that the Party’s discourse and organizational priorities underwent a permanent reversal in this period.”

Women went from being irrelevant to, and largely ignored in, CPUSA discourse to being vital to it. Gosse’s attention is not on women themselves, but on what was said about them and the world they represented. It is necessary to listen to the voices of “American Communists as they spoke of men alone, men and women together, and parents and children, because their language of class also contained, at every point, a politics of gender.” From 1930, in response to Depression conditions, the CPUSA began to address the family, but in traditional terms, using the breakdown of traditional masculine roles as a criticism of capitalism. This did not require a

---

84 Gosse, "Organize," 132.
fundamental amendment of its emphasis on men as definitive of class politics. In recognizing the personal / family lives of the working class as political, the CP did not urge equality in this dimension, but instead held up traditional gendered roles and maintained women's identification with the home and family.

Gosse distinguishes the meanings the CPUSA sought to evoke in its references to class and gender after 1930 and before the Popular Front as tied to the idea of hunger, a criticism of capitalism rooted in its failure to provide even a meager life for working class families. With the Popular Front this critical function shifted to a politics of interclass unity around progressive politics, and then shifted again with the Nazi-Soviet pact back to a critical indictment of capitalism and a re-emphasis of working class identity and solidarity (a shift back to the pre-Popular Front emphasis on the working-class family as harbinger of socialist peace and equality.) What remained through each of these shifts was the new centrality of family and, according to Gosse, recognition by the Party of “women’s sensibilities and experience as part of the class struggle.” Yet such a recognition could hardly be characterized as significant, given Gosse’s later admission that “the CPUSA still lacked a program and a rhetoric that explicitly addressed the need for women’s liberation and the duty of men to recognize themselves as oppressors in the home, on the job, and even in the Party.” Recognition of this need would come only in the 1940s. Gosse’s argument here clearly influenced Kate Weigand’s 2001 *Red Feminism*. He describes “the attempts by Communist women to move their Party and the broader labor and leftist movements towards a politics of gender equality” as a “completely unexplored topic” in 1991.86 My approach to gender and the CPC is similar to Gosse’s dissection of the language of the Party’s class politics in the 1930s, a strategy which foreshadowed the prescriptions of reconnaissance. Yet Gosse uses gender in multiple, and at times confusing and overlapping, ways. He implies that the

CPUSA’s increased attention to the daily lives of the working class entailed an enhanced attentiveness to women. Women became important to, even vital members of, the American Communist movement. Yet Gosse does not argue that the CPUSA’s recognition of women’s gendered interests as politically valid was thoroughly incorporated into its class politics. He argues that the Party’s surge in the Popular Front was built on its hard work in defence of the working-class family, but it remains unclear just how fundamental Gosse thinks the CPUSA’s transformation was.

How is McKay’s work important to this dissertation? Primarily in the emphasis he places on studying socialist formations (in this case, the cultural wing of the CPC in the 1930s) in relation to the liberal order framework. Grasping the logic and movement of this framework is key to understanding the history of socialists’ efforts to move beyond the liberal order, to live otherwise. The liberal order framework has shaped the articulation of socialism in Canada. McKay describes the liberal order as a dynamic, a process of implantation, cultivation and protection. Contrary to liberal thinking, this has never been an organic process, nor has it reflected or embodied any innately Canadian history or identity. In the same sense that McKay divides periods of socialist organization and activism into formations, he describes the liberal order as a hegemonic formation actively created and maintained in an extended passive revolution. The relation between the liberal order and socialist formations is key because liberal hegemony relies as much on gaining the support of those whom liberalism does not serve, on those who are structurally subordinated, as it does on those (relatively much fewer) who are empowered. This means that understanding the cultural and psychic aspects of liberal hegemony are as

---

87 On the fate of the American communist movement, see Robert Shulman, who argues that “[a]s a movement what was lost sight of were the achievements, diversity and avant garde versions of an exceptionally vital cultural dialogue, a tribute to the force of the 1950s negative interpretation.” Shulman, The Power of Political Art, 22.
important – to both socialists and liberals – as analyzing and challenging the more overt forms of political and economic domination.

Looking at the constitutive relationship between liberalism and socialism also helps us to illuminate the ways in which past socialist formations “have also worked to transform the country.” The parameters and meaning of ‘living otherwise’ were and are formulated by activists deeply invested in socialism and enmeshed in a daily struggle against liberal hegemony. It is at this horizontal level that the power of liberal hegemony has prevailed, but also at this level that the possibility of socialism has persisted. In McKay’s words: “Each group of leftists, defined by time, place, demography, types of institutions, and leading ideas, creates a kind of experiment in “living otherwise.”

In relation to McKay’s demand for ‘a new kind of history,’ my objective here is to reconsider the cultural front established (primarily) by members of the CPC during the 1930s and to show that this achieved greater political effect and gained broader popular interest and support than has been allowed. McKay develops an argument for seeing earlier socialist formations in their entirety, focusing on their interrelation rather than dividing them into exclusive camps of social democrats, communists, anarchists, and so on. Candida Rifkind has explicitly applied this approach of “reconnaissance” to the Popular Front period, with specific reference to its literary struggles. During the Popular Front the focus of CPC cultural work was to link liberalism and socialism together in a continuum. The aim was to forge an alliance in support of progressivism between the working and middle classes.

88 Ian McKay, Reasoning Otherwise: Leftists and the People’s Enlightenment in Canada, 1890-1920 (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2008), 10.
89 Ian McKay, Rebels, Reds, Radicals: Rethinking Canada’s Left History (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2005) 35.
90 This ‘front’ has been the subject of a relatively recent reinterpretation by scholars such as Dean Irvine, Alan Filewod, and Candida Rifkind. Until recently, most interpretations dismissed left cultural work (such as Livesay’s) of the 1930s as ‘simply’ propaganda with little artistic or cultural merit. The sense that this work was tied to communist politics was seen as sufficient reason to ignore it.
91 Candida Rifkind, Comrades and Critics, Women, Literature, and the Left in 1930s Canada (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).
Cultural work was one of the most effective ways of holding a socialist mirror up to liberal society, of presenting audiences with a different picture of the present and letting them see that a different world was possible. What was important here was the emphasis on the audience’s perception of socialism as a reasonable and possible future, not the CP as vanguard party. In this, the work of middle-class CP members such as Jean (‘Jim’) Watts and Dorothy Livesay helped to connect Canadian culture with a projected socialist cultural hegemony. The cultural wing of the CP movement in Canada worked (really worked, in the sense of making repeated interjections against liberal common sense) to claim the spirit of liberal society, preserving liberal health and progress by inverting its order, placing social (defined as ‘state’) progress first. For the CPC this was a spectacularly successful political strategy, so much so that Mackenzie King moved to defend liberal hegemony by absorbing aspects of the CPC platform into the Liberal program. It is in this sense that the small and little remembered CP movement in Canada had a lasting impact and did, indeed, “transform the country.”

Many have argued, and initial applications of the strategy of reconnaissance have more than implied, that the CPC’s Popular Front strategy undercut the radical program of the communist movement. While the case could be made that this period did indeed compromise the Party’s political integrity and undermine some members’ faith in the CPC’s leadership, this interpretation overlooks the successes of the period. According to this pessimistic view the cultural work associated with the CPC was insignificant because it failed, because we have not yet achieved

---

92 The editors of Liberalism and Hegemony ask whether McKay’s liberal order framework can be productively applied to the study of culture. They acknowledge its importance for the revision of traditional fields of political, social and economic theory, but add that “it still remains to be seen if the framework can be applied directly to the study of culture.” Jean-François Constant and Michel Ducharme, Liberalism and Hegemony: Debating the Canadian Liberal Revolution (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 22. To my mind, McKay’s framework requires the broader approach of cultural studies, in which political, economic and social traditions are treated as formative and historical elements that cannot be understood in isolation from the more expressly ‘cultural’ phenomena of art and literature, of language. The reconnaissance of previous socialist formations (or ‘leftisms’) is a process of “understanding how each worked as a system of thought and structure of activism for the people involved in it” (McKay, Rebels, 130).
socialism. If we take reconnaissance seriously and set about researching past socialist formations in light of the impact they did have, the ways they did affect how (and if) Canadians thought about liberalism and socialism, a different history emerges, one which can recapture a sense of the obstacles and opportunities for ‘living otherwise.’ The question reconnaissance invites us to consider is not why socialism has not been achieved in Canada, but how successive socialist formations managed to exist. In this way, socialism has shaped our lives and has persisted as a possibility for Canadians. In their attempt to find fulfilment and greater sexual, intellectual, and creative freedom, the activists of the 1930s faced innumerable limitations, including their own. Their struggle with the conflicting elements that shaped their lives and work gives us useful insight, both into their socialism, and our own.

In addition to reconnaissance, this thesis has been deeply shaped by the theoretical insights of queer theory. Queer theory offers a different perspective on the historical processes of making and re-making social meaning. What happens when we study past movements for radical change within its analytic framework? Is there a connection between the emergence of theoretically sophisticated analyses of sexuality and gender, and our interest in rethinking how the past (specifically, the communist movement of the 1930s) was lived? Gender is difficult to unravel; it is both a prescriptive social role and a deeply held sense of identity, both a lived set of expectations and conventions and the discursive configuration of social power. The connection between these worlds is simple for some, tragic for others. Queer theory, with its close attention to the play of language, enables a re-visioning of key

---

moments and movements in the past, movements animated by the possibility of living differently.

Queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes her 1991 work, *The Epistemology of the Closet*, as conceived within a “feminincentric theoretical space,” one based on breakthroughs in socialist-feminist thought.\(^94\) Sedgwick’s own focus is on the epistemological significance of homophobia and homosexual oppression. The significance of her analysis of sexual definition and sexuality lies in her emphasis on the effects of their discursive formulation, the impact of sexual definition on what we know about the world and how we apprehend its (and our own) possibilities. Like Judith Butler, Sedgwick criticizes the distinction feminists have made between sex and gender. While offering many valuable insights, feminist theorists, by emphasizing the constructed quality of gender, and the assumption that we *can* distinguish between gender and sex (implying that we can know what is ‘sex’ and what is ‘gender’), placed sexual difference itself beyond the reach of critical and reflective analysis. Feminist critiques of gender have historically relied on a notion of sexual difference as pre-discursive, and so implicitly privileged sexual difference over other forms of social difference.

Sedgwick deconstructs the cultural common sense of sexual difference as the definitive basis of social identity. Rather than gender, Sedgwick argues that the homosexual-versus-heterosexual dichotomy has been the fulcrum of modern sexual definition, a definitional rubric that has “structured – indeed, fractured -- twentieth-century Western culture as a whole.”\(^95\) This is a big claim to make for the ostensibly private subject of sexual identity, but the freighted quality of sexuality is precisely Sedgwick’s point. Sedgwick describes the “open-secret structure,” in which homosexuals and homosexuality are not acknowledged or avowed, but in which the dichotomy is radically productive of a host of associations and meanings. The effort

---

\(^94\) Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 39.

to unravel the wide effects of sexuality’s construction as homo-or heterosexual is jammed by a discourse in which sexuality is characterized alternately as a continuum (as universal) and as a constitutive sexual (and social) difference. Sedgwick argues that the organizing effect of homosexuality as epistemology is based on an open secret structure that simultaneously poses the possibility of homosexuality as key to sexual definition per se and denies the significance of the distinction. Sedgwick describes this as an unworkable or incoherent yoking together of ‘universalizing’ and ‘minoritizing’ views on sexual definition over the course of the twentieth century, a “long crisis of sexual definition” that has affected every aspect of Western thought and culture.96 The discursive reach of the nominally private domain of sexuality is, according to Sedgwick, limitless. She notes that as “Western culture has placed what it calls sexuality in a more and more distinctively privileged relation to our most prized constructs of individual identity, truth and knowledge, it becomes truer and truer that the language of sexuality not only intersects with but transforms the other languages and relations by which we know.”97 In the case of the CPC, we can see this in the ways in which the CPC newspapers The Clarion and Daily Clarion, while never explicitly normalizing what has become known as ‘the male gaze’, nonetheless inescapably reproduced heterosexual associations and meanings in its photographic representations of women -- ones that not only diminished women as objects, but elevated heterosexual men to a position of discursive authority.

The construction of homosexuality as an open secret has ensured that the political effect of its simple avowal is never positively established. One must ‘come out’ repeatedly as not heterosexual. This is the meaning of Sedgwick’s point that the possibility of being gay depends on making the obvious (but always risky) point that one is gay. This dissertation seeks to extend Sedgwick’s argument on the significance of a dimorphic sexual ideology to the world of Communist politics in 1930s Canada,

96 Sedgwick, Epistemology 1.
97 Ibid., 3.
and to show that a limitation of the CPC as a transformative political movement, especially evident after 1935, was its strategic endorsement of the paternalistic and homophobic ideological structure of bourgeois society.

In this way, Sedgwick’s argument on the epistemological significance of sexuality, and specifically the importance of the definitional divide between heterosexuality and homosexuality can be brought to bear in an assessment of the CPC’s work in the 1930s. Her argument about “discursive incoherence” – whereby an unavowed homosexuality is a key constituent of hegemonic heterosexuality – offers a way to unravel the political impact of ideas about gender and sexuality at the centre of a movement in which they had no acknowledged bearing as either categories of analysis or bases for action.

Taking queer theory seriously would mean that, rather than “trying” the CPC before the court of history for its “deviations,” errors and misdeeds, as both right and left traditionalists like to do, we seek to understand the ways in which gender discourse was used to mobilize women and the middle class in the Popular Front, in ways that both preserved and transformed pre-existing revolutionary understandings. The shift from class war to Popular Front cooperation has been both criticized as the abandonment of class politics, and defended by contemporaries such as Stanley Ryerson as its continuation. Sedgwick’s work offers us a way of transcending this dichotomy, of going beyond such “either/or” accounts, to take full measure of the complexities of Communist gender politics in the 1930s. In particular, it can help us grasp how the post-1935 Communist embrace of bourgeois womanhood could be simultaneously empowering and disabling for those middle-class activists most implicated in it.98

---

98 When using “womanhood” and “woman” in this dissertation I try to be mindful of Judith Butler’s point: “Surely, it must be possible both to use the term [i.e., ‘woman’], to use it tactically even as one is, as it were, used and positioned by it, and also to subject the term to a critique which interrogates the exclusionary operations and differential power-relations that construct and delimit feminist invocations of ‘women.” Judith Butler, Bodies That Matter, 29.
I also draw on Judith Butler’s sense of femininity as an attribute which is intersubjectively ascribed and enacted. I argue that the attributes of bourgeois womanhood both helped and hindered particular activists’ search for recognition as cultural producers. That is to say, the middle-class women who projected an idealized maternalism on to working-class women -- “militant mothering,” in Sangster’s expression -- were indeed involved in an exercise that was contradictory and problematic, especially for those who were neither working-class nor mothers. Yet they did achieve recognition, a “foot in the political door” and a “voice at the table” through this strategy of strategic essentialism. Once again, as with the traditionalism/revisionism dichotomy, an approach that pits “true interests” against “false consciousness” with respect to the Woman Question can be transcended by one that looks closely at the implications, contradictions, and possibilities opened up and foreclosed by a particular discourse.

Reconnaissance and queer theory offer new, more productive ways of approaching the involvement of activists in the CPC during the 1930s. Such new approaches allow us to ask questions that lie outside the traditional dichotomies of Communist historiography. What did the Party enable middle-class women to do that would have been impossible otherwise? How did their class position and perspective shape their involvement in the movement? Was this an asset to the CPC or to them? How were their ideas about gender equality and sexual freedom supported or undermined by their work as members of the CPC? Was the Party a place where being female mattered? As a ‘system of thought’ did the Party offer other (counter-hegemonic) ways of understanding and being female? Most importantly, did the CPC enable thinking about (and living) non-normative forms of love, sex and sexuality?

99 As Heather Love remarks, à propos Judith Butler: “[S]he reminds us that while we continue to try to change the world, we remain deeply tied by desire and the need for recognition to the world as it is.” Heather Love, "Dwelling in Ambivalence," Women’s Review of Books, November 2004, 18.
This approach is hardly an invitation to be uncritical of the CPC and its activists. For instance, the answer to this last question is a qualified no. Where the new approach differs from older, more categorical ones is that it seeks to bring latitude to this “no” and to analysis of “the woman question” itself. This dissertation seeks to show that in crucial ways the CPC was not different enough from the liberal order it defined itself against. In both worlds non-normative forms of love, sex, and desire were both possible and impossible, dismissed as minor, ‘private’ matters, and condemned as functionally inconsistent with social health and progress. In contrast with simply describing the CPC’s position as a reflection of the prevailing sexism and male prejudice of the 1930s and 1940s, as Sangster and other feminists were apt to do in the 1980s, this thesis asks, What did such representations and ideals do for the CPC and its members? The Party’s appropriation of maternalism and its deployment of motherhood should not, however, be viewed as entirely negative. What good came out of using the metaphors of motherhood to describe the working-class movement and the Soviet Union? Striking a rather different, if no less critical, balance than these earlier scholars, I argue that the CPC’s mobilization of familial metaphors was profoundly double-edged. Negatively, as I have already said, it in essence turned the Woman Question, with its potentially subversive possibilities and imaginings, into the Family Question, with its inherently reactionary idealization of dehistoricized images of Man, Woman and Child. Positively, it gave the Party both a legacy and a claim on the future. Through the images and metaphors of family life, CPC members claimed political legitimacy and parentage for the difficult process of socialist transformation. Metaphors of family nurturance and mutual support were an exercise in what has recently been called “soft power,” an effort to build understanding of and identification with Soviet

---

100 Communist politics did attract the interest, support and endorsement of women who strayed far from the normative fold. Some became members, such as Jim Watts, others, like the Americans Dorothea Lange and Martha Gelhorn, were sympathetic to communist causes.
communism amongst Canadians, socialist and otherwise. Through asserting the importance of the family, the Party claimed the normative power of sexual and gender orthodoxy, and placed itself in judgment on the social and sexual depredations of a declining bourgeoisie. Rather than merely dwelling upon the theoretical inconsistencies involved in the Party’s appropriation of bourgeois gender ideology, my concern is to analyse both the possibilities this opened for the Party and its members, and the limitations this placed on their activist agency and political imagination.

***

Rather than seeing its “cultural front” work as a peripheral, secondary aspect of the movement’s history, a minor reflection of its “really significant” work in the unions, this thesis argues that there was nothing secondary about this sphere. In many respects, the interwar Communists did their most important and enduring work on the cultural front. They created an ambitious counter-hegemonic culture, in which the future possibilities of a post-liberal democratic order were played out in their present. They performed the socialism they were working to achieve. This emphasis was nowhere more obvious than in the theatrical performances that were such an intrinsic part of the cultural front.  

This raises the question of class reductionism and the presence in the CPC of men and women who were neither waged workers nor members of families in which waged work provided the primary means of subsistence—i.e., the “middle class,” in the increasingly accepted shorthand of the day. The growing audiences for the work of the PAC, and the membership of the PAC itself, attest to the CPC’s new traction among middle-class people in the 1930s and the political possibilities this development generated, especially in urban Canada. The theatrical revolution of the 1930s, while certainly congruent with the CPC’s traditional emphasis on the politics of class struggle and the rights of labour, was one that challenged bourgeois hegemony on a far wider cultural front.

The theme of “middle-class Communism” might arouse scepticism, both among Depression Communism’s numerous neo-liberal detractors, inclined to diagnose “dupery” and “self-deception,” and among its equally vehement left-wing critics, tempted to discern in each middle-class recruit an agent consciously or unconsciously destined to adulterate a genuine working-class radicalism. Yet, from a different perspective, that represented by this thesis, that so many middle-class urban Canadians gravitated to the Communist cause in the 1930s and 1940s is a profoundly interesting indication of the movement’s new capacity to appeal beyond its working-class base.

These new Communist middle-class milieux were important. Of all the figures associated with Depression-era Communism in Canada, for example, Norman Bethune looms large as an important activist and subsequently an eloquent symbol of the era—and Bethune’s political and cultural activism (expressed in such venues as

painting classes for children) were intimately shaped by a dynamic middle-class radical milieu in anglophone Montreal. Bethune was not a wage worker, and neither were most of the Communist comrades he knew best. The historian Stanley Ryerson, to give another example, must figure in any account of radical thought in Canada from the 1940s to the 1970s. He served as Bethune’s mentor and was no less shaped by the middle-class milieux of left-wing Montreal and then Toronto. Of particular importance for this thesis is a third middle-class recruit: writer and cultural activist Margaret Fairley. From the 1920s on, Fairley, who had taught at the University of Alberta in Lethbridge and been denied her own degree in English literature at Oxford despite finishing at the top of her class, was a figure who bridged the worlds of middle-class academia and the CPC’s radical activism. Her writing in the nationalist and reformist Canadian Forum in the 1920s placed women and domesticity in their political context and revealingly accepted that middle-class women relied upon working-class servants. Fairley in turn was a bridge to a broader University of Toronto community. Students and faculty at the University of Toronto


105 For instance, responding to the dearth of domestic servants in the early 1920s, Fairley affirmed the reasonableness of employees’ desire for privacy and autonomy, and suggested that rather than pitting housewife employers against domestic workers, progressives should try to find ways of meeting the needs of middle-class women and their household ‘help.’
were increasingly vocal in their criticisms of the government’s actions against the CPC. Some attended the mass demonstrations at Queen’s Park and Toronto City Hall in the university’s immediate neighbourhood. In addition to Margaret Fairley and her husband Barker, Otto Van der Sprenkel, E.K. Brown, Felix Walter, and G.E. Jackson, professor of economics and director of the University of Toronto’s commerce course, were the teachers, mentors and friends of students such as Stanley Ryerson, C.B. Macpherson, Leon Edel, Dorothy Livesay and Jean Watts. Middle-class attachment to the CPC -- a phenomenon especially marked in Toronto, Montreal, and Ottawa -- is an important and underexplored aspect of the Canadian Popular Front.

The middle-class activists’ affiliations to bourgeois structures of power — familial, social, institutional and cultural — were central to the urban successes of the CPC in this period and to the Popular Front itself. Such connections helped these newly-prominent activists reshape the culture and politics of the left and the liberal majority in Canada. Analyzing the Popular Front exclusively in terms of and as part of Communist Party history and politics can offer only a partial and partisan sense of the period. Who defined the Popular Front? Certainly Dimitrov and the CI, Stalin and the CPSU, Tim Buck and the CPC (as any “traditionalist” would say). Yet on another level the Popular Front was defined as much by the ideas, the initiative, the resources, the connections and the opportunities of members such as Bethune and Ryerson (as the new “post-revisionist” would reply). To write its history means respecting not just the CPC but the networks of activists and friends who shared many of its ideals, even if they were not officially members.

***

This thesis is based upon an intensive reading of the primary sources, particularly the interwar Communist daily and weekly press — *The Worker, The Clarion, the Daily Clarion, and The Young Worker*, all published in Toronto, as well as cultural publications linked to Communists, especially *Masses* and *New Frontier*. It also relies upon the records of the Communist International, CPC convention proceedings, the abundant Robert Kenny collection of manuscripts and publications devoted to Communist Party activities, and the extant manuscript sources left by Watts and Livesay, especially the Livesay papers in the Archives and Special Collections division of the Library of the University of Manitoba.

My core argument, explored in Chapters Two, Three and Four, is that the symbolic importance of womanhood and family became key to the interwar CPC’s efforts to challenge bourgeois hegemony. The CPC appropriated bourgeois gender norms and conventions to facilitate its dramatic shifts in line, and in particular the shift from the Third Period to the Popular Front. Over the course of the 1930s to 1950s, motherhood, fatherhood, and family became important symbols in the Communist Party, metaphors for legitimacy, orthodoxy, stability, and progress. The Party spoke in gendered metaphors that identified motherhood with national history and pride, and fatherhood with statecraft and scientific socialism. The image of the Soviet Union as Socialist Fatherland affirmed members' faith in the Party as the infallible leader to socialism. In 1935, while nominally retaining the revolutionary idea of sexual egalitarianism, the Party adopted bourgeois gender ideology to its own purposes, and began to focus on women's maternal role in the family and society as the template of feminine identity.

---


109 Canadian feminists have attributed the CPC’s failure to address sex-based inequality to the prevailing sexism and male prejudice of the 1930s and 40s. This view does not address what sexism and homophobia did for the Party, in supporting the Party’s claim to authority and leadership of the working-class movement in Canada.
Although this thesis wants to ask big questions about the Communist Party, it does so in part by looking closely at two women in particular. Chapters Five, Six and Seven of the dissertation focus on the contributions of two female members of the CPC during the 1930s. They are Jean (Jim) Watts (1909-1968) and Dorothy Livesay (1909-1996). Both were members of the CPC by 1932, Watts joining slightly before Livesay. Both first joined the YCL and then the CPC, at a time when the Party was actively seeking to increase its Anglo-Saxon component. Each was middle-class, university-educated, and primarily interested in the cultural wing of the Communist movement. Dorothy Livesay is revered as one of Canada’s best-known female poets, and is also known as a life-long advocate of peace and socialism. Jean Watts is less known. Beyond family and friends, she is familiar only to scholars and activists focused on left culture in Canada. Yet in the 1930s she was the more prominent, an active member of the CPC, a leading figure in Canadian theatre, a journalist and patron of the literary left. Married to a fellow comrade in 1934, Watts was ‘openly’ – but not ‘publicly’ – bisexual. (That is, she neither hid the bisexuality she avowed in the late 1920s, nor did she make it an issue in the Communist public sphere). It is unknown when (or even if) she left the CPC. Throughout the 1930s Dorothy Livesay identified herself as a heterosexual woman, and persevered through unrequited love and failed relationships. By 1939, a wife and new mother, she left the CPC. For both Watts and Livesay, the decision to join the Party was rooted in their alignment with the CPC’s revolutionary politics, including, crucially, the radical sexual egalitarianism of the Third Period. They took the Party at its word, in its emphasis on class as the basis of organization and action. In keeping with this logic, it was not as women that they joined the Party, but as activists and cultural workers. They experienced the Party as an oppressive institution and as a force that liberated them from the loneliness and alienation of middle-class life.¹¹⁰ Many other studies,

¹¹⁰ Dorothy Livesay’s memoirs often refer to “the fate of creative women” as lonely, alienated, difficult
written with various purposes and from various perspectives, have looked at Dorothy Livesay; this is the first extensive treatment of her friend and comrade, Jim Watts.  

Unlike the vast majority of CPC members, Livesay and Watts were not drawn from the working class. They were university educated, middle-class women -- and their relatively privileged social position was a crucial element in their Communist careers. There was an important, and often productive, disjunction between the lives they led and the ideals they projected onto the Party and the proletariat it purported to represent. They deeply wanted to matter, to do something of lasting significance for the betterment of society. Yet, rather than brooding over their alienation or daydreaming about ideal societies, Livesay and Watts immersed themselves in the often stormy and dangerous world of Communist politics. Class privilege insulated them from the day-to-day difficulties of ordinary proletarian life, and enabled them to theorize all the more uncompromisingly the politics that proletarian life should create. It gave them the margin above sheer poverty that allowed them to devote themselves unstintingly to the Party. And, to a degree, it allowed them to critically assess bourgeois femininity and to articulate a form of proletarian feminism. Was the significance of their work in the Party diminished by the fact that their work reinforced the tendency within the Party to identify women with a universalized mother-role? Or did their simple presence in the Party as cultural workers expand the horizons for all women who wanted to do important and relevant work? Both.


This strategy of looking closely at Livesay and Watts might appear to be a continuation of the paradoxical "biographism" that has long characterized the CPC. Texts about individual Canadian communists -- memoirs, autobiographies and biographies -- have long been staple items in the corpus of works about the movement. Many of them are self-justifying, hagiographical and romantic. 112 Of late a new style, theoretically alert and empirically grounded, has been developed,113 and within the international literature, one discerns a revived interest in crafting critical explorations of the Communist experience on the individual scale. 114

As others have noted, there are significant advantages to exploring broad patterns on the individual scale.115 Analysis at this individual level allows us to grasp more precisely the acute contradictions and paradoxes of Depression-era Communism's politics of gender and sexuality. It allows us to gain a more sensitive and contextual understanding of the possibilities open to given Communists -- to understand not only what they could do and say, but what lay beyond their grasp. It sharpens our sense of the double-edgedness of CPC gender discourse, for while in many ways the concept of family and of women's role reinforced traditional and paternalistic views of women and the family within the CPC, the recontextualization of women and family at the centre of the working-class movement was a project that challenged the marginalization of personal life, in which the professional training and

112 See, for instance, Buck, Yours in the Struggle; Minerva Davis, The Wretched of the Earth and -- Me (Toronto: Lugus Publications, 1992); Jack Scott with B.D. Palmer, A Communist Life (St. John's, Newfoundland: Committee on Canadian Labour History, 1988); A.E. Smith, All My Life; Stewart Smith, Comrades and Komsololskas: My Years in the Communist Party of Canada (Toronto: Lugus, 1993).
115 For an insightful discussion, see Toews, “For Liberty, Bread and Love,” conclusion.
accreditation of middle-class women such as Watts, Livesay, and Fairley were put to work.

Through empowering women such as Livesay and Watts as cultural workers, the Party drew on the training they had acquired as bourgeois women to reinforce its own leadership and authority as part of its challenge to bourgeois hegemony. One effect of bourgeois women's involvement in the Party was to show that the Party was the logical place where popular notions of essential womanhood could be fulfilled, where women's concern for peace and security for their families would determine politics. Through their cultural work they helped to identify the Party with the ideals of progress, social order, national sovereignty and security, ideals aligned in the commonsense of the day with a paternalistic and patriarchal organization of gender and family life. These ideals became particularly powerful after 1932, as working-class poverty and insecurity threatened established gender roles.

What I hope to convey is the sense of ground-shifting reasonableness that the CPC and its program possessed for Watts and Livesay, and for many others like them. Their commitment to the Party was closely linked to its view that sexual difference was not as important as class difference. Class politics offered women such as Livesay and Watts a weapon against the gendered constraints of bourgeois womanhood. But that the CP did not recognize sexual difference as a basis of political identification did not mean that it eschewed sexual difference or denied its importance to identity. Under these circumstances, gender and sexual difference were no less potent aspects of socialist meaning-making; they were attributed and articulated differently. This is seen especially clearly as the CPC shifted from a policy of class war to class unity against fascism, as sexual difference became a way of signaling unity, rather than (as it had earlier) a way of attaching masculinism to the working class and effeminacy to the bourgeoisie. As committed CPC members, women such as Watts and Livesay gained analytic purchase against bourgeois notions
of sex as destiny. The implications of class politics for re-writing gendered and sexual conventions continued to sustain their commitment to the Party, even as the rhetoric of sexual difference was used to negotiate the leap from class war to class unity with the Popular Front in 1935.

The project of reconstructing the Communist careers of Livesay and Watts and exploring their mutual relationship does not entail the writing of a biography of them. Our focus remains throughout on their place in the CPC and the ways in which their riven friendship took shape in a context of political engagement and ambition. Livesay and especially Watts believed in the CPC’s vision. Attention to the relation between their work for the Party and their position as educated middle-class Canadian women is crucial for a full understanding of their investment in the CPC. There was an apparent disjunction between the ideas Livesay and Watts embraced in 1932, their intense political activism, their engagement in the work of making a cultural and intellectual difference (in terms of their own as well as others’ lives), and the ideas projected in their work for the Party during the Popular Front. In their Popular Front cultural work they drew on the tropes of motherhood as a means to politically mobilize women in support of working-class politics. Certainly they saw themselves as Bolsheviks, but they also deeply (and very differently) identified with women and had joined the CPC because they wanted a better deal and a bigger world for women.

Borrowing from Judith Butler’s sense of femininity as an attribute which is intersubjectively ascribed and enacted, I argue that while the attributes of bourgeois womanhood were incompatible with their own desire for recognition as cultural producers, they projected the attributes of maternalism on to working class women as the unequivocally solid basis of women's claim to political authority and action. Livesay and Watts were effective in delivering the party’s message not because they identified with the women they addressed, as Custance had earlier done, but because
they identified themselves with the Party. Their position as middle-class women became particularly important in the Popular Front, in the sense that, as bourgeois women, they became one face of antifascist, interclass solidarity. The poetry Livesay wrote and the plays Watts produced presented men and women and families, at work, at home, in love and conflict, but they were about the need for political change, about the difference between the way things were and what they could be. Through their Popular Front cultural work they helped to identify the Party with the possibility of progress, social order, national sovereignty and security.

Watts and Livesay saw themselves as socialists, rather than feminists, yet feminism was a key factor in their involvement with the CPC. In their work as members of the CPC they identified with the Party, rather than with women, working-class or bourgeois. This unwillingness to identify with either bourgeois or proletarian versions of gender was empowering for them and useful to the Party. Their class background distanced them from the lives of the working-class, yet in their work they spoke on behalf of the CPC, as women and as writers and theatre workers. Yet it was not as women that their work mattered for the Party. Unlike other female activists, they were not assigned responsibility for organizing or educating women. Their work was pitched to head and heart, and gender figured insofar as it helped deliver the Party’s message and build support for socialism. As much as Engels’s and Bebel’s writings on women may have influenced them, Watts and Livesay were more immediately influenced by the everyday political needs of the CPC.

This dissertation aims to put the cultural work of Livesay and Watts in the context of CPC politics and to illuminate the factors shaping it. It strives, not to write their biographies, but rather to critically assess the various ways they tried to challenge the commonsense of bourgeois society. Livesay and especially Watts believed in the vision that the CPC represented. They believed that the balance of
social power was changing, that a better world could be made and, indeed, had been made in the Soviet Union. They threw themselves into the unfolding historical process, giving it their full attention and energy.

***

This thesis entails six further chapters. Chapter Two describes in greater detail the world of interwar Communism in Canada. Chapter Three examines gender in the politics of the Communist Party of Canada. Chapter Four sketches the evolution of cultural work aligned with the CPC and the portrayal of gender in this. Then, in Chapters Five, Six and Seven, I discuss the effects of the connection between gender as political discourse and social convention in the work of Dorothy Livesay and Jim Watts. My interest in recovering something of Watts’s and Livesay’s investment in the communist movement, cultural and political, reflects the fact that the possibility of living differently persists in our own time. Their work was a concrete example of what Ian McKay has called “reasoning otherwise,” and their part in the Communist movement of the 1930s was part of an enduring tradition in Canada, a part of our history that has been strenuously ignored by political and cultural elites, but never entirely submerged or eradicated.

In addition to analysing the work of Livesay and Watts, I hope to convey some of the excitement and energy of the cohort that sought a revolution in Canada between the two world wars. I want to bring back to memory the charged atmosphere of need and hope in which they worked for a new form of reasoning and a new kind of life. Jim Watts and Dorothy Livesay were far from typical or exemplary women, but as middle-class women working on behalf of socialism and the CPC the message they conveyed, in their presence and in their work, was that only socialism could redeem women’s destiny and honour her freedom. The promise of
revolution that lay in Depression Canada was eloquently evoked by a fellow Toronto red, Minerva Davis, who became one of the CPC’s “rebel girls.” In her memoir, *The Wretched of the Earth And—Me*, Davis evokes the urgency and anger that prompted her decision to join the movement, but also the excitement and camaraderie, indeed the sheer sexiness, of the movement: “Here we met a group of brilliant young men – Oscar Ryan, who was national secretary of the Young Communist League (a full-time job); Charlie Marriot, its leading literary light; Leslie Morris, a romantic figure of Welsh descent and Ukrainian inclination, and Stewart Smith, very blond, very good looking and surrounded by the aura of having just returned from the Lenin Institute – a sort of communist university . . . Everything was impressive to me in my naïveté.”

Divided from them by class and ethnicity, Davis nonetheless shared Watts’s and Livesay’s hope for social renewal and equality. As Davis recounts: “In the ‘20s, a foreign accent was a key to rejection and disdain. I ached to be accepted, to be as Canadian as [the] Orangemen and women who paraded so magnificently on my birthday.... Joining the Young Communist League at 18 years of age brought me into a new world, a world of acceptance, or realization of self-worth, a chance to work for an ideal of a better world for oneself and for others. A new world was in birth and I ingested it all with joy.”

---

116 Minerva Davis, *The Wretched of the Earth and—Me* (Toronto: Lugus Publications, 1992), 66. When Davis went to New York in 1927, Charles Marriot made her a present of Edna St. Vincent Millay’s book of poetry, *Figs From Thistles*. While working briefly in New York City, Davis attended the Summer School for Girls in Industry, offered by faculty of Barnard College and Bryn Mawr. Davis married Charlie Marriot in 1930, in Winnipeg, where he was working as a District Organizer for the CPC.

117 Davis, *The Wretched of the Earth And—Me*, xii.
Chapter Two

The Turbulent Transnational World of Interwar Canadian Communism

The Canadian Communist discourse on women in the interwar period paradoxically combined a vehement insistence on the scientific and certain knowledge upon which the Party based its principled policies and an equally pronounced tendency to dramatic changes in its official ideology. Chapter One has outlined in abbreviated and abstract form the gist of these changes. This chapter now seeks to provide a richer empirical discussion of the various ways in which Canadian Communists, operating in the context of a Soviet-centred transnational movement, sought to adjust their interpretation of Canadian realities in the light of developments in the Marxist-Leninist approach to revolutionary politics.

***

With the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, the new Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) became ‘the light in the East,’ the hope of international socialism, and Lenin’s Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) the model of vanguard party politics. The Third International, the Communist International (CI and Comintern) was formed in Moscow, March 1919. The Communist Party of Canada was organized as an underground party in May 1921, and then as the legal Workers’ Party of Canada in February 1922. Stalin became the general secretary of the CPSU in 1922, and gradually consolidated his pre-eminent position, in a process marked by such milestones as the victory of the slogan ‘Socialism in One Country,” the Third Period, the exile of Trotsky, and the abandonment of the New Economic Policy in favour of Five-Year Plans and the collectivization of the peasantry. For some
historians, this process of ‘Stalinization’ was not fully complete until 1934 — certainly Trotsky, Stalin’s nemesis, thought that his regime was ripe for overthrow in the early 1930s. After Lenin’s death in 1924, dissent and opposition within the CPSU and the Comintern were progressively marginalized. Stalin’s re-visioning of Leninism began in 1924, when he introduced the possibility of building socialism in one country. In 1925 the possibility was presented as a necessity, in light of the defeat of proletarian revolution in Europe.\textsuperscript{118}

Stalin claimed to represent Lenin’s political legacy, yet he transformed both Leninism and the style and substance of Soviet politics. With respect to gender, in contrast to Lenin’s vision of the socialist state as scientific and sexless, Stalin used gender and sexual metaphors to define and dramatize the situation in the Soviet Union and abroad. Especially revealing is the language Stalin used in 1931 to describe Russia’s past and future:

In the past, we had no fatherland, nor could we have had one. But now that we have overthrown capitalism and power is in our hands, in the hands of the people, we have a fatherland, and we must uphold its independence. Do you want our socialist fatherland to be beaten and to lose its independence? If you do not want this, you must put an end to backwardness in the shortest possible time and develop a genuine Bolshevik tempo in building up its socialist economy. To slacken the tempo would mean falling behind. And those who fall behind get beaten. But we do not want to be beaten. No, we refuse to be beaten! One feature of the history of old Russia was the continual beatings she suffered because of her backwardness . . . She was beaten by British and French capitalists. She was beaten by Japanese barons. All beat her — because of her backwardness, political backwardness, industrial backwardness, agricultural backwardness . . . We are fifty or a hundred years behind the advanced countries. We must make good this distance in ten years. Either we do it or we shall go under.\textsuperscript{119}

The very survival of the Soviet Union depended on refusing feminine backwardness, on asserting the masculine qualities of will and independence. The survival of the

\textsuperscript{118} For a useful general description of these developments, see David Priestland, \textit{The Red Flag: A History of Communism} (New York: Grove Press, 2009).

socialist fatherland, a nation in the making, required a masculine autonomy and independence, defined as the opposite of feminine subordination and dependence.

The deployment of gender and sexuality in such Communist discourse was contradictory but highly productive and rhetorically robust. The negative associations of femininity were identified with the bourgeoisie, while positive qualities, such as nurturance and loyalty, were retained as synonymous with the proletariat. Working-class women were portrayed in terms of the masculine qualities of a mobilized working class, chiefly loyalty and class solidarity. Party women were celebrated for their devotion to class unity and CP authority. The identification of women with motherhood and maternity in the evolving framework of Soviet hegemony had a powerful effect on the Canadian Party in general and on its female members in particular.

The Communist Party of Canada (CPC) grew in fits and starts over the course of the 1920s. Stalin as general secretary of the CPSU, head of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and father of international communism shaped the broad contours of the Canadian movement, while in no way predetermining the ways in which local activists selectively applied his dictates. After Lenin’s death in 1924 the interests of industrial development and Soviet national security dominated the discourse of the CPSU. As we have seen, after 1928 the Comintern used the term “Third Period” for what it described as the intensification of international class struggle, the sharpening of social contradictions under capitalism, and the imminent possibility of a revolutionary transformation of economic and social relations. The opportunity represented by the Third Period was threatened by the presence within the CP of “right opportunists,” who allegedly advocated cooperation with reformist and social democratic organizations and individuals, and believed that capitalism had not yet run its course. The critique of right opportunism was linked to efforts to discredit the Workers’ Opposition in Russia and Trotsky’s notion of permanent
revolution, and to bolster Stalin’s leadership of the CPSU. Somewhat paradoxically, the argument that international capitalism had entered its Third Period, in which the intensification of class conflict meant the possibility of proletarian revolution, strengthened Stalin’s view that it was not only possible but crucial to base international socialism in the Soviet Union, to build socialism in one country.

Jane Degras has claimed that by 1928 the Comintern had become unhinged from its political and historical framework. Perhaps too pessimistically, she comments: “A policy became correct merely by virtue of being adopted, and a ‘deviation’ was no longer a departure from an accepted principle, but a label which could be applied as the occasion demanded,” a phenomenon she interestingly associates with the dullness and repetitiveness of many Comintern communications.\(^{120}\) She concludes, as do William Rodney and Ian Angus, that by 1929 the class-against-class policy was fully deployed in all sections of the Comintern, marking the end of national autonomy within the international movement. Moscow’s disregard for local conditions reflected the increasingly authoritarian and bureaucratic organization of power within both the CPSU and the Comintern. The repudiation of cooperation with social democrats, now vilified as “social fascists,” was deemed vital to the international movement, as “it was only over the corpse of social democracy that the working class could wage its struggle against capitalism.”\(^{121}\) A manifesto issued by the executive committee of the CI on 2 March 1929 hailed the end of international capitalism:

Neither the League of Nations nor the lying pacifist propaganda of the social-democracy, neither the capitalist rationalization nor the attempts of the reformers to establish industrial peace, will be able to abolish the growing crisis of capitalism. Capitalism is approaching a new world war which must end in a catastrophe for capitalism. The first world war ended with the breakdown of the imperialist front and the establishment of the first proletarian dictatorship. A second imperialist world war and an intervention

\(^{120}\) Degras, The Communist International 1919-1943. Documents, III, vi.

\(^{121}\) Ibid., 37.
against the Soviet Union will give the system of world imperialism the last and final blow.122

This view was echoed in the Communist Party of Canada, in its portrayals of international capitalism as careening from crisis to crisis. The birth of socialist movements around the world, and especially the formation of the Soviet Union, the first socialist state, were read as symptoms of this historical process, signs of the emergence of a collective will and political force that would abolish private property and make social equality a reality.

The Political Thesis of the Communist Party of Canada presented at the Sixth National Convention in early June of 1929 emphasized the leadership of the Soviet Union and echoed CI policy:

The third period, i.e., the present period, is characterized by the development of the conditions of a new frontal attack of the proletarian world forces against capitalism. That which is outstanding in this period is the fantastic intensification of the contradictions within the capitalist world, the intensification of all the major, first-rate contradictions in the capitalist world on the one hand, and the growth and construction of socialism in the Soviet Union ... 123

Informal cooperation or strategic alliance with social democrats was roundly condemned; according to the CPC's Political Thesis, communists working with social democrats “would amount in essence to a betrayal of the true interests of the working class, to a false estimation of the role of social democracy, to an underestimation of the war danger; in short a manifestation of the right danger...”124

In contrast to members who advocated cooperation as key to achieving revolutionary

122 Ibid., 19. The Soviet Union was a member of the League of Nations from 1934 to 1939.
goals, CPC leaders argued (in 1929) that moderation imperiled the revolution, and that socialism could be won only through undiluted class conflict.

With the expulsion of Leon Trotsky from the CPSU, Maurice Spector from the CPC in Canada and James Cannon from the CPUSA, among many other dissidents, by 1929 the CI could claim to have expunged supposedly ultra-left elements from the movement. In the 1920s CPC leaders Florence Custance and Jack MacDonald had argued that progress toward revolutionary goals could be achieved through cooperation with bourgeois intellectuals and social democrats who could be won to the revolutionary cause. In the Soviet Union, official condemnation of such ‘right-wing deviationism’ was part of repudiating the New Economic Policy (NEP), which since 1921 had stabilized the Soviet economy through cooperation with bourgeois and petit-bourgeois elements. The ‘Nepmen’ who had made this policy successful now stood in the way of establishing a ‘command economy’ built on rapid industrialization and the collectivization of agriculture. The Third Period brought a renewed emphasis on revolutionary strategy and proletarian identity. The interests of the bourgeoisie and working class were once again deemed irreconcilable. Stalin argued that revolution from above, controlled by the CPSU, was an immediate imperative because bourgeois elements threatened to dilute the Party’s revolutionary objectives and proletarian identity. Stabilization had been achieved through the NEP and by 1929 it was necessary to reassert the revolutionary objectives of the working class and reject all forms of class cooperation.

The project of building socialism in one country became central to Stalin’s reconceptualization of Marxist and Leninist theory. The First Five Year Plan, initiated in 1928, was justified as crucial to ensuring the security and independence of the socialist fatherland. Every section of the Communist International was charged with the protection of Soviet socialism from internal dissidence as well as international aggression. At the Sixth Convention of the Comintern in July-August
1928 all communist parties were instructed to bolshevize their membership. The primary site of political organizing was to be the shop or industrial workplace, with neighbourhood-based branches for unemployed or unorganized workers. The policy met with some resistance in Canada and the ensuing purge of members had a devastating impact on CPC numbers and morale. An important element of this shift in Canada was the absorption of the Women’s Labour League into the Workers’ Unity League and the abolition of the language associations. From 1929 the public face of the national CPC leadership was to be, by and large, white, Anglo-Celtic, and male — in a party still overwhelmingly comprised of members of minority ethnic groups.

After 1926, the first generation CPC leaders, Spector, Custance and MacDonald, came to feel themselves to be increasingly at odds with developments in the CPSU and the ECCI. According to William Rodney, Custance was an important supporter of Jack MacDonald, the party secretary until 1929. At the CPC’s Sixth Convention in 1929, the founding members who remained in the Party – Custance, MacDonald, Salsberg, Mike Buhay and William Moriarty – were each accused of right deviationism. William Rodney has shown that throughout 1928-1929 this group, especially Spector and MacDonald, had worked to delay the CPC’s alignment with shifts in the international communist movement. Its emphasis on working-class identity and unity as defined by the CPSU and CI meant that aspects of working-class experience deemed secondary, such as gender and ethnicity, were suppressed or ignored within the CPC.

Younger members led the crusade to Bolshevize the Canadian Party and ‘return’ the Party to its vanguard role in a revolutionary class war. As well as a shift

---


126 For important new evidence of the damage the purge of the CPC entailed for the Finns of Northern Ontario, see Michel Beaulieu, “Proletarian Prometheus: Socialism, Ethnicity, and Revolution at the Lakehead, 1900-1935,” Ph.D. Thesis, Queen’s University, 2007, Chapter 9.
from the united front politics of leaders such as MacDonald and Custance to a more stringent and sectarian form of class politics, there was (as Fitzpatrick notes of the Soviet Union) an important generational transition occurring during the late 1920s, a shift in authority and leadership at every level of the CP. In 1928 Canadian Party members (following the CI’s urging) began to pay greater attention to the relationship between the Young Communist League and the Party, and debated the role of the YCL within the national movement. First generation CPC leaders were criticized for downplaying the YCL or for hastily promoting its leading members into the CPC. The debate was inflamed by the fact that the YCL was becoming a forum for the expression of intergenerational conflict between leaders such as Custance and MacDonald, and younger members, such as Stewart Smith, Oscar Ryan and Beckie Buhay, wholehearted supporters of Stalin’s policies. Beckie Buhay had worked with Tim Buck to bring the criticisms and frustrations of the YCL to the Party’s attention. With the dissolution of the language federations and the absorption of the WLLs by the WUL in 1931, Buck and the second generation of CPC leaders considered Bolshevization achieved, in name if not fully in fact.127

In Summer, 1928 members of the CPC were unsettled by the controversy that followed Maurice Spector’s return from Moscow, where he had attended the Sixth Congress of the CI. Spector had brought with him a copy of Trotsky’s “Criticism of the Draft Program of the Communist International.” Shortly afterwards he revealed his support for Trotsky’s Left Opposition and his criticism of Stalin’s leadership. Spector’s expulsion in November, 1928 was the beginning of bringing the CPC fully in line with the CI. By the end of the CPC’s own Sixth National Convention in early June 1929, Jack MacDonald and Florence Custance had also been deposed. The

127 As Buhay told the Political Committee in 1930, with respect to the Sudbury Finns on the Sudbury District Executive of the Woman’s Labor Leagues, “These comrades do not believe in the Party center directing and organizing and determining the activities of the revolutionary movement, they want ‘democracy’, each section should do as they like, which is the very essence of opportunism.” “Statement of the Woman’s Director, National Woman’s Department, on the Anti-Party Actions of our Finnish members in the Sudbury District Executive Woman’s Labor Leagues,” 1929, Comintern Papers, Delio 495, Opis 98 [Reel K-280].
convention elected Tim Buck the new General Secretary of the CPC. Strategic missteps and revolutionary righteousness had resulted in the loss of both experienced leaders and rank and file members: CPC numbers reportedly shrank from 2,876 in early 1929 to 1,385 at the start of 1930.  

The Trade Union Education League (TUEL, formed in 1922) had been the CPC’s organizational forum in the Canadian trade union movement, the base from which Party members joined craft and industrial trade unions and union organizations such as the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada. Until 1929 members had sought to build support for the CP through their involvement with workers in mass organizations such as the Canadian Labour Party, the Women’s Labour League and the All-Canadian Congress of Labour. In 1929 the TUEL’s function as organizational center was transferred to the newly-formed Workers’ Unity League, which openly identified itself as a revolutionary trade union organization and sought members on the basis of an explicitly revolutionary platform. The formation of a revolutionary trade union organization was deemed not only possible but necessary in conditions of rising class conflict. Rather than working from below to inspire workers to class-based struggle, the Party openly claimed its role as leader and educator of the working class. The CPC established the Workers’ Unity League in order to build an industrially-based union movement

---

128 Norman Penner, *Canadian Communism: the Stalin Years and Beyond* (Toronto: Methuen, 1988), 93. Penner draws this number from Tim Buck’s Report to the Sixth Plenum of the CPC, January 1930.

129 The united front from below is summed up in the following quote from the Communist Party of Great Britain’s 1922 manifesto, urging workers to support Labour Party candidates in the national election:

“The large body of the working-class forces in the Labour Party stands for the fight against capitalism, even though they do not clearly understand the implications of the struggle. They are still the easy victims of reactionary leaders; they are misled by the false hope of overcoming the ruthless capitalist domination through paper Parliamentary reforms. But, inasmuch as they stand for the fight against capitalism, we are with them in action, even while we point out their mistakes.

Because we are convinced that by the struggle against capitalism they will be compelled to adopt the policy of the Communist Party sooner or later or perish, we decline to put opposition candidates against the Labour Party candidates where these are already fighting. Labour cannot afford to present a broken front to the enemy in the crisis to-day. We call on the revolutionary workers not to hesitate to give the most active support to every Labour Candidate. Whatever our criticisms among ourselves, in all action against the capitalists we present a common front.” From http://www2.cddc.vt.edu/marxists/history/international/comintern/sections/britain/periodicals/communist/1922/10/28.htm, accessed 5 February 2010.
in Canada, in opposition to the craft orientation of the AFL in the U.S. and the ACCL and TLC in Canada. The WUL organized and supported industrial and service workers traditionally ignored by unions, and became famous for organizing and sustaining strikes in areas considered difficult to organize throughout the early 1930s.

Ian McKay describes Florence Custance as a force in the first socialist formation and “a towering figure” in the second.\(^{130}\) William Rodney’s assessment of Florence Custance stands out amongst earlier CPC historiography, in that he credits her with being “one of the original driving forces which helped to coordinate and bring about the communist movement in its earliest days.”\(^ {131}\) In contrast, Ivan Avakumovic’s downplays Custance’s part in the early communist movement, giving her a quick gloss: “[s]everal women also took part in the slow process of organizing those who saw the Bolsheviks as the wave of the future. The best known was Florence Custance, a teacher born in England and the wife of a prosperous and understanding accountant.”\(^ {132}\) This, together with the thin treatment Custance receives in official CPC publications, has obscured her role in the early communist movement. In the established canon of CPC historiography, even that of critical scholars, Custance is often overlooked.

Among socialist feminist historians, however, Custance has been credited with almost single-handedly organizing the Women’s Labour Leagues as effective forces that brought working-class wives and daughters into Party work. However important the WLLs, many male Communists regarded them as a sideshow to the class struggle and took their fundraising labours for granted.\(^ {133}\) They were especially

\(^{130}\) McKay, *Reasoning Otherwise* 41, 179.

\(^{131}\) Rodney, *Soldiers of the International*, passim.

\(^{132}\) Ivan Avakumovic, *The Communist Party in Canada: a history* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1975), II.

\(^{133}\) Joan Sangster provides an excellent and extensive treatment of the role played by the WLLs within the CPC. They were absorbed by the Workers’ Unity League, formed in 1929. As Sangster remarks, “The Comintern-inspired critique of the WLLs denigrated their reformist auxiliary work, but the
vulnerable to the new politics that came to the fore at the inauguration of the Third Period. At the 1929 national convention, the balance of power within the Party shifted to a younger group of leaders led by Tim Buck, whose political consciousness and commitment were defined by Party doctrine and sustained by Party discipline. The members who wrote the CPC's 1929 convention report viewed the Party's work among women as too important to be managed by women alone. They were sharply critical, even dismissive, of the policies followed by Custance, whose strategy and message were ruthlessly denounced.

We have in the past looked upon woman work [sic] as activity for our women comrades only. This is absolutely wrong and must be corrected...This in itself is an underestimation of the importance of this work. The C.E.C. has allowed the gravest of right errors to be committed by the Director of this department [Custance] without any attempts at correction... The approach has been mainly to housewives while little has been done towards reaching the masses of organized and unorganized factory women, and we have looked upon the W.L.L's as practically our sole base for this work. The propaganda put forth has been petit-bourgeois, pacifist in character, impermissible in [the]Communist party.\textsuperscript{134}

Custance was accused of pandering to social democratic mores, rather than working for radical change. She was supposedly prone to the “bourgeois sentimentalism” allegedly rampant in the WLLs. Beckie Buhay’s scathing assessment of her work in the English-language WLL of Toronto was a classic Stalinist caricature of an approach to organizing that, in her judgment, strayed far beyond the revolutionary purism mandatory for women’s work in a revolutionary communist party. Over “many years leadership of Comrade Custance,” Buhay reported, the WLL “was unable to get any working women employed in industry into its ranks. It is made up of housewives, many of whom are the wives of the small officials of the All Canadian Congress of Labor or pure ‘feminists’. Its activities consisted in the

\textsuperscript{134}Kenny Collection, Box 2, Folder 3, Report of the Sixth National Convention of the CPC, 1929.
main of Euchre Parties or endless lectures on birth control (as an alleviation of economic ills), or lectures by bourgeois doctors and university professors....” Buhay went on to denounce the WLL’s factional make-up and loyalties before concluding, categorically, “The League as it exists today is really of no value to the working class movement.” Her comments were in line with the CPC’s Third Period position of harsh criticism of federalism. Custance’s fall from grace ultimately derived not from her supposedly “unrevolutionary” politics, but from her adamant insistence on organizing women at a time when the Party was being reorganized on tightly centralized lines. After she died in 1929 and the WLL was incorporated into the Workers’ Unity League, women with families were largely ignored for the remainder of the Third Period. Her loss was lamented by the grass-roots activists she had worked with to build the WLL.

In its 1929 convention report, CEC members of the Communist Party of Canada echoed the CI’s call for a vigilant politics of class war. The analysis detailed in their report spells out the significance the Party attached to women’s employment in industry. While this development signaled the inexorable degradation of labour in capitalist production, women’s involvement in waged/industrial work also politicized them and brought them fully into class struggle. For the Party, a crucial aspect of female labour in 1929 was the strategic position women would occupy in war industry factories in the event of international war. In the Third Period (1928-1934/5), the Party viewed its work among women as important not primarily because of the condition of women, housewives or workers, but because of what women’s work in

---


136 As a letter from the Sudbury District, Canadian Federation of Women’s Labor Leagues, n.d. [February 1930], lamented: "Ever since Comrade Custance became so ill that she was unable to fulfill the duties of her beloved League, the Centre has been completely paralysed [paralyzed]. After the death of Comrade Custance, the work has been totally neglected. Our organ, the 'Woman Worker', which did such good educational and organizational work, died with Comrade Custance...." Comintern Fonds, Opis 98, Delio 495 [Reel K-278, File 107].
industry indicated about the relations of capital and wage labour, and because of the pivotal role women would fill in war industries.

The new Party leaders argued that in the past CPC organizers had pandered to the particular interests of immigrants and women. Again and again the 1929 convention report reiterated that it was imperative to recruit new members from among male anglophone and French Canadian workers, as well as from the ranks of the poorest farmers and the female industrial workers. Such populations were considered to be the Party’s ‘natural’ and most promising constituencies. Their positions in industry and agriculture would be strategically decisive in the looming class war. Women not directly exploited in wage labour were another thing altogether. They required instruction in the dynamics of capitalist society. Whereas male working-class youths would experience for themselves the alienation of waged work, the position of women in working-class struggle remained uncertain and unfixed in CPC organizing and analysis. Married women’s involvement in industry was criticized as an injury to working-class families, an argument that reinforced the symbolic function of women. Socialism would enable women to fulfill their roles as wives and mothers, and men to fulfill theirs as workers and fathers. This gendering of labour as subjectivity enabled the Party to forecast a better but still familiar future beyond capitalism, yet it relied on women’s historical identification with the family, and naturalized the distinction between productive and reproductive labour.

In 1929 the CPC no longer condoned members’ involvement in organizations and associations not directly controlled by the Party. In the crucial Third Period all work was to be guided by CPC leadership. With the emphasis on Party leadership and industrial militancy, organizations such as the Women’s Labour League were transformed from a venue for women’s activism and education into another platform for disseminating the views of the Party’s leadership. Reports on women’s activities were opportunities to express unity around key working-class demands, labour
solidarity and militant industrial action. In bundling their interests as women into their class identification, the Party enabled women to speak as *women* only as a supportive and subordinate element of the working-class movement. Under Custance’s leadership of the WLLs, sex and gender had been acknowledged as key aspects of women’s perspective as both wives and workers, and utilized as the basis for engaging women in revolutionary politics. In contrast, during the Third Period, the impact of sex and gender in revolutionary politics was relegated to the margins of the movement, unimportant and virtually invisible.  

That an estimated 90% of female Party members had been housewives — “inactive passive elements,” in the words of the Constitution Commission’s 1929 report on Organizational and Inner Party Problems -- did not reflect favourably upon the CPC. Here was a problem to be fixed, not a legacy to be built upon.

Its criticism of Custance’s work was an opportunity for the new CPC to assert the importance of a strict Bolshevik chain of command and authority. Henceforth, the CPC’s work among women would be controlled by the Workers’ Unity League and closely directed by the leadership:

... the immanence [sic] of war; the extension and development of bourgeois patriotic and jingoistic organizations among broad sections of the working class women, demands from the Party much greater attention, supervision and energetic support of work among women than ever before. The character of this work in the past has been unsatisfactory and confined in the main to housewives, with the complete neglect of women in industry. There have been distinct manifestations of bourgeois pacifism in this work. All this can only be corrected by a strict supervision from the center down to the lower units.

---

137 This was similar to the CPSU’s claim in 1929 that it had raised Soviet women to the same status of men. Who would contest such a magnificently egalitarian claim?  
139 Kenny Collection, MS 179, box 2, folder 3, “Political and Economic Situation, Resolution of the Sixth National Convention of the C.P. of C. on the Letter From the Women’s Secretariat of the C.I. on Woman’s Work,” 68.
The errors that had been tolerated within the Party -- “(C.L.P. policy, Trade Union work, Agrarian work, Women’s work, Labor Defense, tendency to legalism, social democratic Party structure, failure to orient Party work on basis [sic] industries, etc)” were detailed in letters from the Political Secretariat of the ECCI to the CEC of the Canadian Party, and from the Women’s Secretariat of the CI to the CEC. The latter illustrated the interconnections between all aspects of the Party’s work. The CPC’s work among women under Florence Custance was dismissed as “absolutely wrong.” While the CEC acknowledged it was itself “to be severely criticized for allowing such a situation of affairs to exist[,]” it was Custance who was saddled with the burden of error. Custance’s skill and commitment were legendary, yet her strengths were anomalous in a CPC increasingly defined and dominated by Stalin. Custance’s long involvement with the socialist movement in Canada marked her as an unreliable comrade in the atmosphere of the Third Period. The Sixth Convention ended her long political career and diminished her legacy in the CPC. Custance died shortly after, on 12 July 1929.

In 1929 Tim Buck, Beckie Buhay and Stewart Smith prevailed in the campaign to reorient the CPC around revolutionary class struggle and Bolshevization. In its report on the “Political Thesis adopted at the 1st Plenary Session of the C.E.C. of CPC, July 12,” the authors distanced themselves from the political work of the CPC’s first generation of leaders. The same year, they issued a report in which organizing women was plainly and narrowly linked to the potential role women would fill in the predicted anti-Soviet war the Comintern had made a founding assumption of the Third Period. “[A]n ever growing army of women proletarians is developing,” they proclaimed,

\[\text{\textsuperscript{140}} \text{Ibid.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{141}} \text{Ibid.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{142}} \text{The radicalism of the YCL, the influence of the Lenin School in Moscow on YCL leaders Stewart Smith and Leslie Morris, uncertainty in the wake of Spector’s expulsion, Stalin’s call for a complete cultural revolution and the eradication of bourgeois influence in the Soviet Union, all fed the sense that a ‘return’ to revolutionary ideals and action was necessary in 1929.}\]
who are replacing men and are in competition with one another on
the labor market, thus helping the capitalist class to further reduce
the living standards of the workers, and forces [sic] large number of
married women into the industrial process. Of vital importance is
the fact that women are largely employed in potential war industries
(rubber, auto, textile, etc.) This together with the fact that the
continuous introduction of new machinery and methods is laying
the technical basis for an enormous further employment of women
in the event of an emergency such as war, makes the party work
among women enormously important in the struggle against the war
danger and the task of organizing the unorganized. 143

Work among women that Custance had justified in terms of women's own need to
theorize and combat the specificities of their position in capitalist society was here
justified according to the requirements of the Soviet Union.

***

On 15 April 1932 members of the Toronto Police Commissioner Draper's
infamous 'Red Squad' visited a united front meeting organized to plan the annual
Toronto May Day Conference. This particular meeting was legal, although the CPC
itself had been made illegal with the conviction four months earlier of eight party
officials and leaders. The biggest bully of the squad, Detective Sergeant William
Nursey, walked slowly up and down the aisles, staring into each face. When the five
Red Squad officers finally left the meeting, Nursey had illegally seized a
correspondence file belonging to the meeting organizer, James Bryson. The meeting
continued until 10.30 p.m., and the following day Bryson led a delegation to the
Mayor of Toronto, issued a statement to the press, and wrote a letter of complaint to

Over the summer of 1932 there were many similar instances of police
intimidation, to the degree that it was the police rather than political organizers and

---

143 Kenny Collection, Report of the Sixth National Convention of the Communist Party of Canada,
May 31-June 7 1929, 68.
protesters who appeared lawless in the eyes of many members of the public. Such tactics of political repression and violence served to reinforce the CPC’s message that new methods of economic and political management were urgently needed. While Draper’s Red Squad sought to curb communist influence on streets, in meeting rooms and parks throughout Toronto, Prime Minister R.B. Bennett delivered the same message at the federal level. After using the courts to shut down the Communist Party of Canada, Bennett tried to suppress the movement by ridicule or ignoring its demands for relief and unemployment insurance. Bennett’s high-handed attitude toward workers’ demands, combined with his tough legal tactics, made his Conservative government deeply unpopular with many workers and large sections of the urban middle class. Public sympathy for the CPC only increased when the trial of eight CPC leaders in November 1931 ended with their conviction under the notorious Section 98 of the Criminal Code for membership in an illegal organization and seditious conspiracy in early December. By January, 1932 the eight were in prison in Kingston, and the Canadian Labor Defence League put all its energies into the campaign to win their release and repeal Section 98. The conviction illustrated the besieged status of civil rights in Canada, and the trial sparked broad support for the Communist Party.

In the hands of adept party organizers and astute cultural activists such as Oscar Ryan, the state’s campaign against the CPC became a civil rights cause, attracting not only broad support amongst workers, but also among middle-class intellectuals and professionals. At the First Representative National Convention of the Canadian Labor Defense League, in July 1933, Beckie Buhay reported that the CLDL’s campaign was “now drawing hundreds of thousands of individuals from all sections of society, including workers, farmers, the middle class and the churches.

144 For a good description, see Petryshyn, “R.B.Bennett and the Communists: 1930-1935.”
into the fight for democratic rights.”¹⁴⁵ By early 1934 the CLDL claimed a membership of 43,000, up from 25,000 in the spring of 1932; it collected over 459,000 signatures on a petition for Tim Buck’s release from penitentiary.¹⁴⁶ The interest and support generated for the CPC throughout 1932 became the basis of an informal united front in Canada, one deeply inspiring to the two middle-class recruits who are the focus of later chapters: Jean Watts and Dorothy Livesay.

In 1932 the now-illegal CPC continued to function through mass organizations. Despite Prime Minister Bennett, the Toronto Police Commission’s Red Squad, and the Ontario judiciary, efforts to suppress the CPC only worked to enhance its credibility in what was becoming the worst year of the Depression. In tandem with its campaign against Section 98, the underground CPC focused on basic, practical needs: the defense of unemployed workers against arrest and eviction, adequate relief to families and individuals, legal rights for labour, education and training for working-class youth. In their defense of working-class rights and needs, and in their challenge to government and police repression, CPC members gained attention and respect. In 1932 membership in the CPC’s mass organizations, chiefly the CLDL, the Workers’ Unity League, and the Progressive Arts Club, began to climb rapidly.

In 1928 Stalin announced the first Five Year Plan, designed and implemented to rapidly modernize the Soviet economy. In 1931, he proclaimed the success of agricultural collectivization. According to Stalin, the Soviet Union state was showing the world that a workers’ state was not only possible, it was more efficient than any capitalist state could be. The ability of the Soviet Union to transform itself from a backward to a leading country confirmed the place of the Soviet Union and the Communist Party in the vanguard of history. The early successes of the First Five

¹⁴⁶ Avakumovic, Communist Party in Canada 89-90.
Year Plan were viewed by members of the Communist Party in Canada as proof that Soviet socialism was indeed scientific. The situation in Canada in 1931, with the Party itself newly banned, was a world away. Despite the distance between them, events and ideas in the Soviet Union deeply influenced the outlook of Canadian members, who looked to it as the model for achieving socialism.

In 1934 the CPC published *What the Communist Party Stands For*. Based on M.J. Olgin’s *Why Communism*, the book described the Communist Party to Canadian workers, and explained the relation between the Canadian state and economy.\footnote{147 Using the paternal manner Ian McKay describes as characteristic of earlier Canadian socialists. See McKay, *Reasoning Otherwise* 52-54.} Intended to explain the fundamentals of communist theory and to establish the political necessity of CPC leadership, the publication lacked any analysis of the Canadian situation, and broadly dismissed the recently formed Cooperative Commonwealth Federation.\footnote{148 This point is from Penner, *Canadian Communism* 149. Penned incorrectly dates the publication of *What Communism Stands For* as 1936.} Even though the term “social fascist” was no longer the favoured epithet amongst CPC members, social democrats continued to be the object of criticism. The chapter on the state concluded on a familiar note, only expressed more politely: “Do not be surprised if you hear Communists uttering harsh words against the C.C.F. leaders. Here we have anti-working class activities carried on in the name of Socialism; destructive tactics parade here as means to liberate the workers. A class-conscious worker can find no words harsh enough to characterize such a line of action.”\footnote{149 Communist Party of Canada, *What the Communist Party Stands For* (Montreal: Contemporary Publishing Association, 1934), 38-39.} The Party continued to seek the unequivocal leadership of the working class, and for the time being continued, politely and not-so-politely, to condemn the ideology and institutions of social democracy.

Support for the Soviet Union (rather than cooperation with social democrats) was the way to counter imperialism and fascism, because “[t]he land of Soviets...stands as an impregnable wall against international fascism, and by the
successes of socialist construction is mobilizing the working class of the entire world against capitalism." In December of 1933, at the CI's Plenum on “Fascism, The War Danger, and the Tasks of Communist Parties,” fascism was described as “the open, terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinist and most imperialist elements of finance capital.” The plenum document argued that fascism signaled the death process of capitalism itself, in which social groups such as the middle class and youth would be directly affected long before the big bourgeoisie. The CI document explained that the only correct response to the capitalist crisis was to support the dictatorship of the proletariat, and that doing so (as opposed to supporting social democracy) would help to speed progress on reaching socialism. Criticism of social democracy derived from the Party’s view that the work of social democrats impeded the process of turning the economic crisis into a revolutionary crisis. According to this view, the effect of social democrats was to divide and confuse the working class, and so to forestall revolutionary change. The CI described the international situation in the language of gestation and rebirth:

Born in the womb of bourgeois democracy, fascism in the eyes of the capitalists is a means of saving capitalism from collapse. It is only for the purpose of deceiving and disarming the workers that social-democracy denies the fascistization of bourgeois democracy and draws a contrast in principle between the democratic countries and the countries of the fascist dictatorship. On the other hand, the fascist dictatorship is not an inevitable stage of the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie in all countries. The possibility of averting it depends upon the forces of the fighting proletariat, which are paralyzed by the corrupting [disintegrating] influence of social-democracy more than by anything else.

In the eyes of party members fascism and social democracy were only different versions of capitalism. The vilification of social democrats as social fascists continued until the summer of 1934, when developments in Europe led CP leaders to argue the need for cooperation with some social democrats. By April, 1935 the ECCI of the CI

---

150 Degras, *Communist International* III, 268. This was technically the 13th ECCI plenum.
151 Ibid., 296.
152 Ibid., 297.
was calling for joint May Day actions: “Communist, social-democratic and non-party workers! Members of reformist, revolutionary, anarcho-syndicalist and [C]hristian trade unions, members of cooperative societies, sports societies, cultural and all other working-class organizations! Build the united front of all proletarians in joint struggle!”

Members of the communist parties in every country were to lead a united front at every level. Defense of the Soviet Union continued to be paramount: “Render active support to the struggle of the Soviet Union for peace! For the defense of the USSR, the fatherland of the toilers in all lands!”

The transition to inter-class cooperation around anti-fascism was a lengthy and uneven process. Just before Tim Buck’s surprise release from Kingston Penitentiary in November of 1934, George Pierce published a rousing condemnation of the C.C.F. under the deceptively sedate title, *Socialism and the C.C.F.* Pierce was a pseudonym for Stewart Smith, acting general secretary of the CPC while Buck was in prison. As Manley reveals, Buck’s release was an opportunity to introduce the possibility of cooperation with social democrats and other elements of progressive opinion. Buck would claim that during his incarceration the less experienced (and implying, the less perceptive) acting leadership had not understood that Canadian workers wanted unity against fascism in Canada and abroad. Manley strips Tim Buck’s career as general secretary of the CPC of logic or value save his own ambition and Soviet control. In Manley’s view, Buck’s leadership from the Sixth Convention of the CPC in 1929 amounted to a campaign to win the approval of the CI leadership and ensure his own prominence in the bolshevized CPC. According to Manley, Tim


154 Ibid.

155 One of the last to give up denouncing social democrats as “social fascists,” Smith later put his full support behind the Popular Front Against Fascism, after attending the historic Seventh Congress of the CI in Moscow, where the Popular Front was officially announced.

156 John Manley delivers a critical assessment of Tim Buck’s career as head of the CPC, arguing that Buck’s prominence was engineered by, and entirely dependent on, his subordination to Stalin, the CPSU and the CI. Manley describes Buck as congenial and ambitious, a combination that ensured he was both popular with Canadian workers and a reliable representative of Soviet interests in Canada and the CI. See Manley, ”"Audacity, Audacity, Still More Audacity,″ 11.
Buck’s style of leadership suited the Popular Front not because it reflected any deeply held political ideas he possessed, but because it matched the very loose (Manley does not go so far as to say ‘empty’) politics of the Popular Front, a politics he considers to be dominated and defined by Soviet security and stability. In Manley’s estimation, Tim Buck rolled with every Soviet wave. Manley’s assessment of Buck is pessimistic and (in my view) excessively dismissive. Yet, it is undeniable that Buck’s release from Kingston Penitentiary marked the point at which the CPC began to orient itself toward, rather than against, social democratic ideology and institutions. The relative popularity of the Party and its work had been growing since 1932; in the Popular Front period this was further bolstered by its embrace of family and nation, cornerstones of mainstream Canadian society.157

The Canadian government was also in a state of reorientation. In January 1935 Bennett followed Roosevelt’s example and offered a New Deal for Canadians. However, public feeling against Bennett and the Conservative Party remained high, and in the federal election of October 1935 Bennett’s Conservative Party won only forty seats, Mackenzie King’s Liberal Party one hundred and seventy three.158 The communist press was not impressed: King was described in The Worker as Tweedle Dee to Bennett’s Tweedle Dum. Less than two weeks before Buck’s release, F. Biggs had warned in The Worker of “the steady advance towards Fascism that is being fostered by the Canadian capitalists, an advance engineered and directed within the limits of parliamentary democracy like that of President Roosevelt in the United States.”159 The reviled Bennett was ousted, but Communists remained, for the time, just as wary of Mackenzie King.

157 That support for the CPC was high during this particularly militant period might suggest that it was precisely the CPC’s emphasis on revolution and on creating a radically different social system that was important to its appeal, especially in the depths of the worst years of the Depression.
158 In an effort to staunch rising public support for the CPC, the new Prime Minister W.L.M. King introduced legislation to repeal Section 98 of the criminal code. In 1936 the motion passed the Liberal-dominated Commons quickly and was finally approved in the Senate.
159 “How Fascism is Breeding Here Within the Limits of So-Called Democracy,” The Worker, 17 November 1934, 5.
On 5 December 1934, a small item on the front page of *The Worker* informed readers that the prominent Bolshevik official Sergei Kirov had been murdered on 1 December at his office in the Smolny Institute, Leningrad. The assassination was described as an attack on the Socialist Fatherland; Kirov, a Bolshevik son of the revolution, must (cried the newspaper) be avenged: “We return blow for blow to the enemy. Death to enemies of the workers! Raise higher the banner of the great proletarian dictatorship. Rally your ranks closer around our party, around our Central Committee, led by the great leader of toiling mankind, Stalin!”

In its editorial on 26 December, the *Worker* defended the execution of those described as “white guard assassins and agents of the Nazis” and asserted that Kirov’s murder was part of the counterrevolutionary movement led by Trotsky. Against editorials in the conservative and liberal press which asked whether ‘Soviet justice’ was state tyranny, *The Worker* presented the execution of Kirov’s assassin as the Soviet people’s will, the expression of the popular determination to protect the Soviet state as the dictatorship of the working class. This was socialist justice, necessary because the battle was between fascism and socialism:

Fascism is the dictatorship of the capitalist class, the brazen, brutal will of the minority, the destroyer of working class organizations, the wrecker of culture, the organizer of war, the oppression (sic) of women, the enemy of national minorities. Fascism stands for black and bloody reaction.

The dictatorship of the working class is the transitory weapon of the workers to destroy capitalism, to make impossible the rise of Fascism, the guardian of the workers’ interests, the uplifter of the peasantry, the organizer of Socialist industry, the custodian of all that is best in world culture, the harbinger of the future classless society, the fighter for peace.

...The murderers of Kirov will meet the punishment which is due them..."}

---

160 “Kirov, Outstanding Soviet Leader, Is Killed At Smolny,” *The Worker*, 5 December 1934, 1
The editorial equated the internal and external security of the Soviet Union with anti-fascism. The country's role as beacon to workers in other nations struggling against imperialism and class inequality made it the object of capitalist subterfuge and aggression. Editorial articles in The Worker described it as the only country working for peace among nations, in a world increasingly menaced by war (as the recent events in Ethiopia showed so dramatically). The investigation into Kirov's murder established a story of international counter-revolutionary conspiracy aimed at murdering the leaders of the Party. The Party aligned the Soviet Union with the defence of progress against savagery, order and happiness against chaos and destruction, in the epic battle between bourgeois fascism and proletarian socialism. Kirov's murder, perhaps orchestrated by Stalin himself, is often seen as an indication of the dictator's tightening grip over the Communist Party and a forewarning of the massive purges that were to darken the Soviet 1930s.

By 1934 the focus of the CPC’s work had shifted from the industrial fighter to the worker and his family. The Depression had placed tremendous pressure on working-class families. Preserving the gendered order of the Canadian family and the security of the family home became key issues for the Party. Many historians have noted the importance of the proletarian family in Communist ideology during the Popular Front. The family came to dominate and define the Party’s vision of social order in 1935, at the same time that member nations were ostensibly released from the control and supervision of the CI. The two developments were connected to one another. Analysis and criticism of bourgeois ideology took a back seat to

---

162 On 3 October Italy invaded Ethiopia. The League of Nations failed to defend Ethiopia, beyond imposing an arms embargo the Italian forces easily circumvented.

163 For example, see Simon Sebag Montefiore, Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar (London: Phoenix, 2003), 129-171.

building the alliance against fascism. The more accommodating attitude toward bourgeois institutions and conventions of the Popular Front period empowered middle-class intellectuals and artists in the mass organizations affiliated with the CPC. Their work as educators, critics and artists helped give substance and form to the alliance between the working-class and progressive middle-class Canadians against fascism. Much of this work consisted of crafting images of working-class families as the quintessential family, drawing on a Canadian and American “peoples” history defined by thrift, hard work and mutual support, and claiming this history as a source for the project of building socialism in Canada. The habits, dreams and desires that defined ‘family’ were the same for all ‘progressive’ peoples, whether middle- or working-class, but only socialist politics and the CPC would put these within reach of all families.

This process was not without its contradictions. At the end of 1934 Tim Buck was calling for a united front with the CCF, the All-Canadian Congress of Labour, and the American Federation of Labor, while continuing to denounce the CCF’s political leadership. However, for the CPC the struggle now was not between socialism and capitalism, but between fascism and bourgeois democracy. The latter would be defended by Communists for the time being, but the Party’s objective remained the overcoming of bourgeois democracy and the formation of a workers’ state.

One of the ECCI’s 1933 Theses was titled, “For a Revolutionary Way Out of the Crisis — For a Soviet Government.” In this report CI leaders asserted that “[t]here is no way out of the general crisis of capitalism other than the one shown by the October Revolution, viz., the overthrow of the exploiting classes by the proletariat, the confiscation of the banks, of the factories, the mines, transport, houses, the stocks of goods of the capitalists, the lands of the landlords, the church and the
crown. The thesis was translated and published in English and almost certainly influenced Stewart Smith’s harsh assessment of the recently formed Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, published with CPC financing in February of 1934. *Socialism and the CCF* continued — in a particularly strident tone — the depiction of social democracy as the harbinger of fascism. Recently returned from an intensive course at Moscow’s Lenin School, Smith’s exposition on the errors of accommodation with social democratic organizations may have reflected the views of the acting Party executive in Toronto. They were shared by a minority of the CPC’s membership. Smith’s small book was promoted widely in the CPC press in the spring and summer of 1934. Yet at the same time the youth wing of the communist movement was building alliances and making common cause with social democratic organizations outside the framework of class politics.

The vilification of social democrats unevenly gave way to the new interest in a broader unity against fascism, especially among younger and middle-class members. Reports in *The Worker* testify to the contradictory character of the period. Stewart Smith’s intensely sectarian account of the CCF was published in February of 1934 and continued to be endorsed in the pages of *The Worker* and *Young Worker* into the autumn and early winter of 1934.

The early release of Tim Buck from Kingston Penitentiary on 23 November 1934 was hailed as a legal and political victory for the CPC and a vindication of its political work. In Buck’s speech to the multitude cheering his arrival at Union Station on that same day, and to the 17,000 who gathered on 3 December to celebrate at Maple Leaf Gardens, he expressed a new willingness to work with other labour leaders and made an eloquent appeal for unity at all levels of the labour

---

166 *The Worker* reported that 6,000 gathered at Front and York Street, outside the Union Station, to hear Tim Buck make his first public speech after arriving by train from Kingston. The paper also reported that Buck’s arrival at Union Station was met by a greater number of well-wishers — more even than the Prince of Wales, other royalty, more than *any* Canadian public figure. See *The Worker*, 28 November 1934.
movement. In his story for *The Worker* on the rally at Maple Leaf Gardens, journalist E. Cecil-Smith reported the new development without comment. He simply quoted Tim Buck: “We Communists believe that it is possible in Canada, without forgetting our doctrinal differences, for all trade unions and for all parties of the working class and progressive middle class parties to join in the fight against reaction and to build a strong united front for this fight.” “This fight” was described by Buck as “the greatest movement that the working class has ever been called upon to undertake -- the building of class unity against fascism and imperial war.” The CPC’s class-against-class orientation was shifting, slowly, into one emphasizing inter-class unity against war and fascism.

Yet on the speaking tour Buck immediately began he reiterated the need to remain vigilant against social reformism, and continued to identify the CPC as the leader of the working class. Articles in *The Worker* by “George Pierce,” Stewart Smith, Leslie Morris, Tim Buck and others asserted the need for “united labor action” in a CPC-defined program. The article “Which Road . . . Reformism or Leninism,” put the case in apocalyptic terms:

> Either capitalism is to be superseded by a new system which would be able to satisfy the needs of the people and open the floodgates to the higher development of productive forces, science and culture, or – civilization will perish in blood and flames.

In this analysis, the emphasis remained on exclusive CP leadership, and the lines of battle were strictly class-divided. The middle class was depicted as a negligible element in this dynamic, an “intermediary capitalist class” incapable of exerting any effect or force independently. Younger CPC luminaries such as Leslie Morris

---

168 Smith and Pierce were of course one and the same. Occasionally articles would appear on the same page, one under the byline Pierce, the other Smith.
170 *Ibid.* As Cornwell explains: “In practice the middle class must follow either the capitalist class, which means the perpetuation of capitalism with the consequent oppression and gradual squeezing
continued to attack CCF leaders and to describe them as an obstacle to socialism. In a sarcastic gloss on an editorial by Graham Spry, editor of the CCF journal *New Commonwealth*, Morris sought to appeal to CCF rank and file and to present the CCF leadership as hopelessly out of touch with Canadian workers and their allies. Spry’s argument that Canadians were apathetic about the prospect of war illustrated his (and the CCF’s) failure to understand Canadian labour. Morris asks his readers to judge for themselves: “...listen, you workers who are striving to build an anti-war movement, you professionals and intellectuals, you men of the cloth who see the danger and wish to arouse the masses, listen to the New Commonwealth’s summary of the present situation...”\textsuperscript{171} It was not apathy amongst Canadians that was the cause of war, but the lack of organized, united resistance to war by those who claimed to represent labour. Specifically, the danger consisted in CCF leaders such as Graham Spry. Morris rhetorically asks whether Spry uses “the medium of his paper [to] urge the working class and its allies to rouse themselves in the fight against war? Not a bit! He seems never to have heard of the urgent appeals of the Communists for unity in the fight against war and its twin, fascism...”\textsuperscript{172} Morris accused Spry himself of apathy and despair in the face of war, but most damaging was the CCF leaders’ refusal of any sort of united front with communists.

Recognition of the need for cooperation against fascism, abroad and in Canada, clearly did not initially alter the revolutionary politics of the Party, and the Canadian bourgeoisie and its capitalist state continued to bear the brunt of the Party’s criticism. In May 1934 the CPC had received instructions from the ECCI of the CI to form a Canadian branch of the World Congress Against War and

\textsuperscript{171} Leslie Morris, “Those Who Refuse United Front Declare Apathy is Cause of War, Pessimism, Defeatism Answer Drive to New Slaughter,” *The Worker*, 24 November 1934.

\textsuperscript{172} Ibid.
Fascism. In August 1934, the Canadian Youth League Against War and Fascism held its first conference at Central Technical High School on Harbord Street.

With the formation of the Canadian League Against War and Fascism the Party had what would become its most important and effective portal to mainstream Canada. The First Canadian Congress Against War and Fascism grew out of the movement initiated at the World Congress Against Imperialist War, held in Amsterdam at the end of August, 1932. This first congress was the idea of top CI officials, Georgi Dimitrov and Willi Munzenberg, and organized by the French intellectuals Henri Barbusse and Romain Rolland. The name reflected the view that fascism and imperialism were synonymous with bourgeois democracy. Central to the conference was the defence of the SU against invasion by capitalist states. The Party leadership deflected skepticism about the new line; from critics such as J.S. Woodsworth, who dismissed the league as merely “Soviet tactics,” and from some of its own members, who continued to see social democrats as the greatest obstacle to socialism. Others, such as A.E. Smith, head of the CLDL, saw 1935 as a turning point in Canadian class politics: “[m]ore and more our Canadian struggle was linked with the world fight against fascism.” Crucially, the CI and CPC’s definition of who

---

173 See Norman Penner, *Canadian Communism* 147. This resulted in the October 6-7, 1934 convention at which the Canadian League Against War and Fascism was formed. This body was preceded by the Canadian Youth League Against War and Fascism, which became the leading force in organizing united front work.

174 The exact date and circumstances of the formation of the CLWF are unknown. The American League Against War and Fascism was formed in 1933, and the Canadian branch was formed in 1934. Despite the involvement of CPC and YCL members in the Student League Against War and Fascism from the summer of 1934, the CLWF was first mentioned by name in a speech Tim Buck made early in January of 1935. See Norman Penner, p 115. At this first conference of the CYLWF, Peter Hunter was elected National Secretary and Stanley Ryerson President. See Peter Hunter, *Which Side Are You On, Boys: Canadian Life on the Left* (Toronto: Lugus Productions, 1988), 52.

175 See Penner, *Canadian Communism* 133-134, and Degras, *The Communist International* III, 239, for background to the 1932 conference.

176 In the summer of 1934, in response to the deterioration of its relations with Germany, the Soviet Union joined the League of Nations, in an effort to gain some security against the increasing threat of a German invasion. In the spring of 1934, Hitler’s Nazi Party rejected Soviet overtures to renew the Soviet-German friendship treaty. The Soviet Union sought to build a united front with bourgeois democratic states, especially France and England, against fascist Germany. See Penner, *Canadian Communism* 131-132.

177 Smith, *All My Life*, 181.
was a fascist was changing. The word no longer was applied to a vast swathe of non-Communists.

This early initiative was the basis on which the CPC expanded its compass beyond workers and working-class culture, reached out to claim the progressive achievements and elements of the bourgeois state and society from the self-destructive logic of capitalism, and positioned itself as heir and defender of the best of bourgeois culture. With this came a revised view of the existing Canadian state as the basis for a future socialist state. A discourse of destroying bourgeois culture and smashing the bourgeois state was slowly changing into one in which both were achievements that Communists, and only Communists, could bring to a higher level of development.

The Popular Front was in formation before it was announced at the 1935 Seventh Comintern Congress in Moscow. In the U.S. student- and youth-led initiatives pressed for cooperation and united front alliances in support of anti-war and antifascist work. In Canada this work was followed closely by YCL and CCF youth, who organized the first antifascist conference in Canada in August of 1934. In June 1935 the Communist-organized On-to-Ottawa Trek set out to challenge Bennett’s effort to marginalize and silence unemployed workers in Canada. Bennett attacked the delegation to Ottawa (invited by his own ministers) representing the relief camp workers, and refused to acknowledge their grievances as anything other than communist provocation. His mishandling of the delegation and his government’s part in the riot on 1 July at Regina only inflamed popular resentment against him. In contrast, the leaders of the Trek seemed reasonable and restrained, defenders of civil liberties and the common good. It all made for good publicity for building common cause between social democrats and communists.

In Summer 1934, the CPC’s involvement in united front work proceeded even as politically orthodox perspectives on class struggle, such as those of Stewart Smith, remained influential in the Party. The CPC itself continued to be a nominally underground and illegal party, although the thousands of Canadians who had crammed Maple Leaf Gardens to the rafters provided public evidence that the CPC was in fact alive and quite capable of operating in public. Buck’s announcement in The Worker of the importance of a united labour movement was a change in emphasis and breadth, rather than an about-face. The CPC now condoned -- indeed, sought -- cooperation with every representative working-class and labour organization. It also continued to claim exclusive leadership, as the one true vanguard party, of the Canadian working class. The CPC aligned with social democratic organizations it had previously reviled because these were, for better or worse, ones important to many Canadian workers. The CPC’s new focus on fascism began a shift in emphasis, away from a class-based and internationalist orientation intent on radical political change, to a nation-based and defensive orientation, a change that gradually led the CPC to defend the institutions of bourgeois democracy.

Tim Buck’s triumphant re-entry as Party leader in December of 1934 was an opportunity to adopt a more cooperative attitude toward the leadership of labour and social democratic organizations. The sectarian characterization of these organizations as social fascist continued to be expressed in many venues, and the Party’s pronouncements were not closely unified, organized or wholly coherent on this subject, until the Worker began to publish reports from the Seventh CI Congress in Moscow in August 1935. Even then, while the term social fascist was largely dropped from Party rhetoric in favour of a now common interest in the defence of workers, CPC members continued to denounce reformism as an ineffective (though
no longer purely evil) political strategy. The new openness to working with social democratic organizations and individuals had immediate effects on the Party’s ideological framework. The CPC sought to appeal to a broader constituency and oriented many of its appeals to a middle-class constituency it had largely ignored in the past. For six months before the Seventh Comintern Congress the CPC had asked Canadians to support its work in defense of the unemployed and its struggle against fascism. Until the Seventh Congress, its political objectives and orientation remained militantly class-based and revolutionary.

Another indication of diverse and contradictory arguments and ideas within the CPC in 1934-1935 was a series of articles written by Lon Lawson for *The Worker* over the winter of 1934-35. Lawson, an organizer for the CPC as well as a member of the Toronto PAC and a contributor to its journal *Masses* since 1932, was living in New York for the year, with his comrade-wife, Jean Watts, leader of the workers’ theatre movement and until recently business manager of the *Young Worker*. (We shall return to their relationship in Chapter Six). Each of Lawson’s articles analysed relations between American culture and politics. He warned that Roosevelt’s National Reconstruction Administration was one arm of a national movement to crush the Communist Party. A labour movement united in support of Soviet socialism was a dire necessity, but the deck was stacked in favour of homegrown American fascism: “The United States of America is now in the throes of the biggest anti-red campaign in its entire history, a drive which might easily end in the establishment of fascism in that country.” Like Stanley Ryerson, Lawson was a middle-class intellectual who rose to prominence in the CPC on the basis of his

---

179 The CPC was unable to reap significant benefit from its changed orientation, largely because its Third Period sectarianism had so completely alienated and angered the CCF leadership, as well as many members.

180 Lon Lawson, “Roosevelt’s Demagogy.”
complete identification with militant class politics and Soviet socialism. Both (especially Ryerson) were affiliated to political, cultural and intellectual elites in Canada through family and social contact and educational background. Their articles for the Canadian communist press in 1934 pointed to fascism as the pre-eminent threat. They continued to identify fascism with the capitalist state and bourgeois democracy. Lawson denounced Roosevelt’s reconstruction administration as thinly veiled fascism. The headline to his article was “NRA PROGRAM NOT “REFORM” . . . BUT ROBBERY AND FRAUD!” Lawson and Ryerson, and Smith and Buck, each and all supported the formation of a ‘broad united front’ but in early 1935 they continued to emphasize that this would be built from below, a union of the rank and file dedicated to overcoming capitalism and, by implication, routing the fakirs and social democrats. They persisted in denouncing reform as a strategy of fascism designed to destroy the working class movement. Their writings have an apocalyptic atmosphere, one that conveys a strong sense of the Communist movement being precariously perched on the edge of world-shattering events.

In his detailed account of the 1930s cultural front in American Left politics, Michael Denning describes events in the summer of 1934 as “the birth of a new social movement - the Popular Front - out of the depths of the Depression.” Denning sums up 1934 as “one of the lyric years in American history,” “an emblem of urgency, upheaval, and hope.” Denning describes the impact of industrial militancy on the formation of the Popular Front in the U.S. In Canada, political opposition to the state’s suppression of civil rights marked the turning point and first significant

---

181 The same issue of The Worker carried an article by Stanley Ryerson, “Leninism and the Struggles of the Students,” The Worker, 26 January 1935, 6. Ryerson had returned from Paris in the spring of 1934, after doing a postgraduate year at the Sorbonne. He soon became the provincial secretary of the Quebec branch of the CPC in Montreal.

182 I say “designed” here in light of Lawson’s article, in which both Roosevelt’s and Bennett’s programs are “unmasked” as efforts to mislead workers into supporting a program which, by sustaining capitalism, is antithetical to their interests. The objective of this and similar analyses in the party press was to convince workers of this argument, and to provide them the analytic insight (from Leninism) to think through such issues.

183 Denning, The Cultural Front, xiv.

184 Ibid.
victory for labour and the CPC. However, the CPC’s successful campaign against Section 98, and the defeat of R.B. Bennett in the 1935 federal election may also have given many Canadians the sense that the state had been returned to its “neutral” role. The new Prime Minister, the more congenial and consummately political William Lyon Mackenzie King, was able to rebuild Liberal hegemony and deflate support for Popular Front politics in Canada.

Yet 1934 was nonetheless an auspicious year for the CPC. A.E. Smith was acquitted of sedition in March of 1934, the campaign for the release of the CPC leaders had succeeded, popular support for the Party was relatively high, and the unemployed and relief camp workers were organized and militant. In this good news atmosphere, Buck announced -- and announced and announced and announced -- that the CPC stood for the united front. To the massed audience at Maple Leaf Gardens, Buck exclaimed: “We have been released from Kingston just in time to take our place in the greatest movement that the working class of Canada has ever been called upon to undertake -- the building of class unity against fascism and imperialist war.” The YCL had been linking its anti-war work to the case for a united front throughout 1934. Lon Lawson, Stanley Ryerson and Peter Hunter, among others, had organized the youth conference at the Central Technical School on Harbord Street. Its 275 delegates founded the Canadian League of Youth Against War and Fascism, before the formation of the Canadian League Against War and Fascism itself.

185 “Greatest Labor Meeting in History Greets Buck’s Return to Struggle,” The Worker, 5 December 1934, 4

The relation between communists and social democrats in the united front shifted over time. Initially, within the YCL and student movements, policies of winning workers away from reformist leaders remained important (with the CPC supporting unity from below, “splitting” from above). By the winter of 1935, and especially by the Seventh Comintern Congress in August of 1935, official cooperation between all levels of organization was endorsed. “Splitting” was eschewed and the CP’s leadership of class struggle formally renounced in the interests of unity around anti-fascism. An article by Lon Lawson in the Young Worker on 30 July 1933 illustrates that at the time the YCL saw no contradiction between building the united front against war and fascism and continuing the policy of the “united front from below,” which frequently meant in practice, “splitting from above.”
In his survey of Canadian Communism, Norman Penner describes the beginnings of the Popular Front in Canada: “[t]he Party had not abandoned its cherished goal of leading the working class to socialism, but it now moderated the means by which this would be achieved. When Tom Ewen announced the demise of the WUL, he put forward a proposal that the labour movement build a 'broad federated political party of the common people.'” While the CCF leadership rejected the CPC's proposals for unity in political organizing, the Party's efforts to make common cause with social democrats were received more positively by rank-and-file members of the CCF, a split between leaders and membership the CPC sought to capitalize on. The transition from representing the working class (against capital, against social democrats, against fascists) to representing the people took time, but helped the CPC increase membership in and support for the CPC substantially. At official levels, the transition began at the Ninth Plenum of the Central Executive Committee of the CPC in November of 1935. By the Eighth Convention of the CPC in October of 1937 the evolution into Popular Front politics was complete.

In 1935 the Research Bureau of the Canadian Youth Council, a committee of the Canadian Congress of Youth (CCY), compiled its Report on War. Summarizing two centuries of war, the report described the present situation:

Since 1929, social conditions have become extremely tense. Unemployment and distress are practically worldwide. Labour troubles and disputes are on the increase. Relief is becoming a problem of grave concern. There has been a general falling of living standards accompanied by sickness and undernourishment. Social service institutes are taxed beyond capacity. Wage cuts and

---

The report assessed the “possibilities of future wars” and identified which countries had a greater interest in pursuing war. France, England, the United States, and Russia (the name carefully connoting a nonpartisan assessment) were not seeking war, and the report concluded that likely aggressors were Germany, Italy and Japan. The report’s analysis made a strong case for the alliance of bourgeois and socialist forces against German, Italian, and Japanese expansionism. It concluded that the “possibility of a future war would seem therefore, to depend on how long the forces favouring the status quo can, by compromise and treaty, hold off the forces either in need of, or desirous of expansion.” The reason for a united front against war was the welfare of the people and specifically of labour. The CCY’s report put working people at the centre of its discussion and made no mention of class struggle.

In 1934 Canadian CP members were aware of the CI’s new willingness to endorse cooperation with social democrats, indicated in the request from the ECCI to set up an affiliate to the World Committee Against War and Fascism. Some, notably Stewart Smith, continued to denounce social democrats as the advance guard of social fascism. At the next CPC convention, not held until October of 1937, leaders claimed that sectarianism and radicalism had isolated the party from elements of the Canadian working class, and from the many middle-class progressives who sympathized with the working class and believed in socialism as the necessary next step in protecting democratic institutions. This more accommodating orientation vis-à-vis the social democrats and the middle class began as strategic and provisional, an alliance with what were now distinguished as the progressive aspects of bourgeois society and culture, epitomized by the modern Canadian family.

189 Kenny Collection, Box 58, folder 10, 3-4, “Report on War, by the Research Bureau of the Canadian Youth Council, organizing committee for the Congress of Youth, to be held on May 24th and 25th, 1935, in Central Technical School Auditorium,” 3-4.

190 Ibid., 6.
The ECCI published its May Day Manifesto in April of 1935. The document called out to “Communist, Social Democratic and non-Party workers! Members of reformist, revolutionary, anarcho-syndicalist and Christian trade unions, members of cooperative societies, sports societies, cultural and all other working class organizations!” The defence of the Soviet Union against counter-revolution and international fascism was imperative for all who desired socialism. The Soviet Union simply was socialism. And because it was socialism, it stood for progress, international peace, and human development. The document explicitly calls social democrats to join the ranks of communists, rather than to join forces with communists. The manifesto concluded:

There are two worlds, the world of socialism and the world of capitalism. There are two roads, the road of class struggle and that of class collaboration. The road taken by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks), the road taken by the Communist International has led to the abolition of unemployment in the Soviet Union, to a well-to-do life, to freedom and Socialism. The road taken by the International Social Democracy, the road of collaboration with the bourgeoisie, has led to hunger, want and fascist slavery and is leading to imperialist war.  

Anyone who questioned whether the Soviet Union was in fact socialist would have been left cold by the manifesto, as would anyone who was not already sure he or she understood what socialism was. The manifesto’s stringent tone created an either/or dichotomy: for us or against us.

This tone was less pronounced by the time the Seventh CI Congress opened in Moscow on 25 July 1935. The congress was originally scheduled for May of 1934.

---

191 *The Worker*, 20 April 1935, 2
192 Ibid.
and many of the policies and positions presented in August of 1935 had been formulated earlier. Some were even in effect by the time they were officially announced at the Congress. Dimitrov’s speech to the Seventh CI Congress was a pivotal moment in the history of the Communist Party. Jane Degras notes that “[t]he only condition put forward by the Comintern for united action, nationally and internationally, was that it should be directed against fascism, the capitalist offensive, war, and the class enemy. Communists would criticize and attack only those who hindered unity of action. In capitalist countries they were prepared to defend every inch of bourgeois-democratic liberty.”193 However, “[u]nited front tactics did not imply a reconciliation with social-democratic ideology and practice.”194 The immediate battle was between fascism and bourgeois democracy; the possibility of socialism would be maintained through supporting bourgeois democracy against fascism, enabling the continuation of political progress beyond capitalism, dividing bourgeois democracy from capitalism. Dimitrov dutifully quoted Stalin on the relation of class politics to anti-fascism: “Only the welding of the proletariat into a single mass political army will ensure its victory in the struggle against fascism and the power of capital, for the dictatorship of the proletariat and the power of the Soviets. The victory of revolution never comes by itself. It has to be prepared for and won. And only a strong proletarian revolutionary party can prepare for and win victory.”195 Following Stalin, Dimitrov asserted an undiluted proletarian identity as the necessary basis of success, but what of the allusion to other factors as also key to victory? Dimitrov’s speech conveyed both that antifascism required a departure from universalism in CP strategy, and that antifascism was not a substantial departure from CP practice.196 The growth of revolutionary consciousness amongst

194 Ibid.
195 Ibid., 370.
196 Norman Penner notes the latitude of interpretation in evidence after Dimitrov’s speech to the Seventh CI Congress. See Penner, Canadian Communism, 132.
workers and the strength of the Soviet Union signaled the imminent collapse of capitalism. This had been the CI’s point throughout the Third Period. What had changed in 1935 was the acceleration of a ‘wide offensive’ by fascism against the international proletariat and directly against the Soviet Union:

The imperialist circles are trying to shift the whole burden of the crisis onto the shoulders of the working people. That is why they need fascism. They are trying to solve the problem of markets by enslaving the weak nations, by intensifying colonial oppression and repartitioning the world anew by means of war. That is why they need fascism. They are striving to forestall the growth of the forces of revolution by smashing the revolutionary movement of the workers and peasants and by undertaking a military attack against the Soviet Union – the bulwark of the world proletariat. That is why they need fascism.197

Dimitrov explains that fascism is finance capital, differently attired according to national history and custom, but in all cases cut from the cloth of capitalism. German fascism was the most reactionary, described by Dimitrov as “bourgeois chauvinism,” “bestial chauvinism,” “political gangsterism,” and “mediaeval barbarity and bestiality.”198 German fascism was particularly dangerous because it was “acting as the spearhead of international counter-revolution, as the chief instigator of imperialist war, as the initiator of a crusade against the Soviet Union, the great fatherland of the working people of the whole world.”199 This statement set the tone of Dimitrov’s speech. Throughout it he reiterated the danger of counter-revolution, the Soviet Union as defender of peace and progress, and socialism, fatherland to all working people.

The most far-reaching change introduced at the Seventh Congress was the autonomy granted to national sections of the CI. This decision was described as the result of a growth of discipline within the national sections, now capable of negotiating “the most complex political and tactical questions of their countries

197 Georgi Dimitrov, Selected Articles and Speeches, 39.
198 Ibid., 41.
199 Ibid.
While the ECCI would no longer direct the national sections of the CP, it would continue to “advise” them. It urged

all sections of the Communist International to overcome, in the shortest time possible, the survivals of sectarian traditions which prevented them from finding a way of approach to the social-democratic workers, and to change the methods of agitation and propaganda which hitherto were at times abstract in character and scarcely reached the masses, by giving these methods absolutely definite direction and linking them to the immediate needs and the day-to-day interests of the masses.”

The case against social democracy remained, but condemnation was absent from the congress addresses and reports. Flexibility in strategy and policy was now imperative, in light of the need to actively oppose fascism in each country, and so to protect the security and stability of the Soviet Union. The CI executive emphasized the universal scope of danger: “We must all leave this congress clearly realizing that the fate of the proletariat and of all mankind depends on us and on our work.”

The Seventh CI Congress endorsed a view of socialism as specific to the national cultures, histories and economies of each country. National parties were directed to respond to concrete conditions in their nations. In Canada, the CPC would determine the most suitable ways to address the immediate needs of the Canadian working class, build support for a socialist Canada, and safeguard the security of the Soviet Union as the socialist homeland. The Popular Front emphasis on fascism as a phenomenon expressing both the logic of capitalism and the distinct national culture in which it emerges was an important development, one that should not be discounted. Dimitrov acknowledged the specificity and complexity of fascism. Dimitrov’s speech introduced the idea that effectively countering fascism required local strategies and strengths. In this sense, Dimitrov qualified the vanguard status of Soviet socialism and the CPSU, in acknowledging the strategic

---

201 Ibid., 353.
importance of understanding and acting on the immediate and historical conditions shaping fascism in different countries.

Surpassing in its cynicism and hypocrisy all other varieties of bourgeois reaction, fascism adapts its demagogy to the national peculiarities of each country, and even to the peculiarities of the various social strata in one and the same country. And the mass of the petty bourgeoisie and even a section of the workers, reduced to despair by want, unemployment and the insecurity of their existence, fall victim to the social and chauvinist demagogy of fascism.  

Dimitroff described fascism as manipulating the working and middle class of their countries, by appearing to represent their - rather than capital’s - interests. The CI’s earlier argument that social democrats and fascists were linked by a common paternity in capitalism was not inaccurate. In 1935 the CI nonetheless acknowledged that it had underestimated fascism’s ability to exploit popular uncertainty and tensions within the middle and working class.  

Norman Penner has assessed the Seventh CI Congress as a belated correction of past errors in CI strategy and policy. While maintaining that fascism was an expression of the universal logic of international capitalism, Georgi Dimitrov’s speech in August of 1935 was a significant revision, but not a substantial change in the Party’s analysis of class relations. Titled “The Fascist Offensive and the Tasks of the Communist International,” the speech retained the Third Period analysis of bourgeois class domination and international imperialism, but Dimitrov made it clear that the enemy was fascism, in its expanding political and legal forms. The speech reaffirmed the view that fascism was the final face of capitalism. What was new in 1935 was the acknowledgment that it was necessary to align with middle-class social democrats, now hailed as a bulwark against the rise of fascism and its threat to democratic rights and international security. With this speech, the Party quietly

---

202 Ibid., 44.
203 For instance, the appeal of Father Coughlin in the U.S. (and also Canada) in the mid-1930s.
dropped its argument that fascists and social democrats were birds of a feather. One of the errors detailed in the ECCI report was the CP’s “failure to realize the necessity of struggling in defense of the remnants of bourgeois democracy...” This was a significant admission, insofar as it signaled the Communists’ shift to a provisional recognition of the legitimacy of social democratic organizations and institutions, and a new commitment to working with them. This established a historical connection between bourgeois democracy and socialism – with the latter possibly growing out of the former.

It was imperative to draw “the widest masses into the struggle against fascism.” Throughout 1935, The Worker had argued that the Canadian working class was moving to the left. The workers were awakening to the necessity of socialism. Dimitrov’s speech re-affirmed this view. He warned that fascism found support not only amongst the bourgeoisie but also amongst workers and petit bourgeois, increasingly dispossessed and insecure, and acknowledged the momentum that Hitler and the Nazi Party had already gained. Dimitrov formulated the shift in policy established at the convention in the conclusion to his report: “we declare that the Communist International and its Sections are ready to enter into negotiations with the Second International and its Sections for the establishment of the unity of the working class in the struggle against the offensive of capital, against fascism and the menace of imperialist war.” At the same time, Dimitrov made it clear that it was only left social democrats with whom communists were enjoined to unite forces. The possibility of cooperation was thus presented as a result of division between social democrats rather than arising from the communist movement itself: a crisis had been brewing in the social democratic camp, which indicated that it had reached an important crossroads. It was now important to distinguish among various types of social

---

204 Degras, Communist International, 354.
205 Dimitrov, Selected Articles, 65.
democrats, rather than dismiss them all as social fascists, because, as Dimitrov claimed,

there is beginning to form a camp of revolutionary elements who entertain doubts as to the correctness of the policy of class collaboration with the bourgeoisie, who are in favour of the creation of a united front with the Communists, and who are increasingly coming to adopt the position of the revolutionary class struggle. 207

Dimitrov described the Popular Front against Fascism as the means by which the CP would enable workers to fulfill their historical destiny. He was careful, throughout his report, to emphasize that class struggle remained the engine of this destiny. The Party’s role in a popular front continued to be the stewardship of class struggle. The Party’s overtures to social democrats and all progressive elements throughout 1934 and 1935 were made with the proviso that leaders and members must remain vigilant against bourgeois influence and opportunism. As the Popular Front took shape between 1936-1939, this imperative receded.

In his report Dimitrov acknowledged that “in our ranks there was an impermissible underestimation of the fascist danger, a tendency which to this day has not everywhere been overcome.” 208 The emphasis was now to be placed on building unity between social democrats and communists, and between workers and the petit bourgeoisie, not on the basis of the CP leadership’s estimation of what must be done, but “from their vital interests and needs as the starting point, and their own experience as the basis.” 209 Dimitrov criticized Party members for sectarianism, particularly “self-satisfied sectarianism”, which he likened to an ideological superiority complex. This attitude had made it easier for Fascist sympathizers, such as the popular American radio priest, Father Coughlin, to win support amongst workers and their families. The objective of Dimitrov’s speech was

208 Ibid., 52.
209 Ibid., 113.
to remove political obstacles to united front work. The yardstick for measuring the success of its leadership became whether the CP’s work served the interests of ‘the people.’

The widening of its appeal to the working class was indicated in Dimitrov’s brief section on “Women and the United Front,” where he made a point of including all working class women: “women workers, unemployed women, peasant women and housewives.” The CI’s recognition of women’s political significance in their non-waged roles was important in that it undercut tacit support for traditional attitudes toward women within the Party. The acknowledgment of women’s work in the family as politically significant illustrated the organizing opportunities the Popular Front made possible. Before the Popular Front women’s work as wives and mothers had been a marginal issue in the Communist movement, and members were encouraged to focus exclusively on class politics. After 1935 the Party’s new interest in housewives and the significance of women’s reproductive work put women at the centre of the case for socialism. As mothers, wives, and workers, women symbolized the essential connection between social and self-development.

Following the discussion of his speech, Dimitrov addressed the distinction between unity of action and political unity. In both the theory and strategy of the united front, class struggle and class-based organizing remained definitive. The united front allowed for cooperation with social democrats, on the condition that the work supported antifascism and the working-class struggle. The point here is that the united front policy continued the Party’s emphasis on revolutionary analysis and objectives, while enlarging its field. One aspect of this was that the private world of family became central to the public fight for socialism. By the time the Popular Front was announced in 1935 the case for socialism had already shifted to the home, the city street and the public park. The CPC had long been involved in publicizing

\[210\] Ibid., p. 90.
and picketing evictions and in demanding cash relief and non-contributory unemployment insurance. Dimitrov’s speech authorized the approach Canadian communists were already taking in mass organizations, work that recognized personal suffering as the basis for political mobilization.

In another major departure, Dimitrov drew attention to the growth of support for fascism amongst workers and the middle class. Dimitrov asks: “What is the source of the influence of fascism over the masses? Fascism is able to attract the masses because it demagogically appeals to their most urgent needs and demands. Fascism not only inflames prejudices that are deeply ingrained in the masses, but also plays on the better sentiments of the masses, on their sense of justice, and sometimes even on their revolutionary traditions.”

In his published response to the discussion of his report, Dimitrov distinguished several times between leadership of the Party and leadership of the masses. In order to lead the masses, the Party must be able to communicate, to both speak and listen: “the masses cannot assimilate our decisions unless we learn to speak the language which the masses understand.... We do not always know how to speak simply, concretely, in images which are familiar and intelligible to the masses. We are still unable to refrain from abstract formulas which we have learnt by rote . . .” Dimitrov advised his listeners: “When writing or speaking always have in mind the rank-and-file worker, who must understand you, must believe in your appeal and be ready to follow you! You must have in mind those for whom you write, to whom you speak.”

Dimitrov ended the congress proceedings with a quote from Marx that reinforced the renewed emphasis on actual conditions and the balance of class forces in each country: “We must take things as we find them, that is, must utilize revolutionary sentiments in a manner corresponding to the changed circumstances.”

---

211 Ibid., 43.
212 Ibid., 135.
213 Ibid., 156, citing Marx, Letter to Kugelmann, August 23, 1866.
Dimitrov’s argument reflected a shift in the way the Party viewed its relationship with the working class. He emphasized reconfiguring this relationship in a more dialogical fashion.

Two points in Georgi Dimitrov’s closing speech sum up the changed tone of this new united front. The first was his claim that national sections needed flexibility and initiative in order to respond adequately to local situations: “We want to take into account the concrete situation at each moment, in each place, and not act according to a fixed, stereotyped form anywhere and everywhere.”

The second was Dimitrov’s acknowledgment that the Party had become isolated, its top-down style of leadership having alienated it from those in greatest need of its leadership. The solution was, this time, not more education for workers, but the reorientation of each national section of the Communist Party:

> We want to find a common language with the broadest masses for the purpose of struggling against the class enemy, to find ways of finally overcoming the isolation of the revolutionary vanguard from the masses of the proletariat and all other working people, as well as of overcoming the fatal isolation of the working class itself from its natural allies in the struggle against the bourgeoisie, against fascism.

Dimitrov’s final words reiterated the view of fascism as advanced capitalism, and continued to emphasize that the objective of the united front was to speed the victory of the working class over the bourgeoisie. Despite the emphasis on flexibility and autonomy, in 1935 the CI’s orientation and objectives remained - in principle - unchanged. National sections were to be more autonomous, but the change was tactical: “only in this way will the working class at the head of all the working people, welded into a million strong revolutionary army, led by the Communist International and possessed of so great and wise a pilot as our leader Comrade Stalin, be able to

---

214 Ibid., 112-3. Italics in the original.
215 Ibid., 113.
fulfill its historical mission with certainty - to sweep fascism off the face of the earth and, together with it, capitalism.\textsuperscript{216}

***

The CPC’s claim to leadership was pursued through concrete projects, through members’ efforts in and on behalf of the working class. They brought the Party closer to workers’ daily lives and needs. In 1935 members were asked to overcome the sectarianism that leaders now blamed for the isolation of the Party from workers. That the Party now sought to move class politics into the background and stake its claim to leadership on progressivism was expressed in the 1935 federal election slogan, “Communism is Canadian,” and the claim that the CPC itself was “a product of the soil of the Canadian Labor Movement.”\textsuperscript{217} While the CPC was never able to establish a united front with the CCF leadership, it did build considerable support among the rank-and-file CCFers and among prominent social democrats. One of the most notable supporters of popular front cooperation was the Winnipeg judge, Lewis St. George Stubbs. After being removed from the bench because he refused to convict unemployed workers charged with stealing food, Stubbs ran as an independent MLA for Manitoba, and won by a landslide. The Communist candidate, James Litterick, benefited from Stubbs’ popularity: “[t]hough his first choice votes were just short of permitting his election on the first count, the transfer of second choice votes from L. St. George Stubbs’ huge count, secured his election.”\textsuperscript{218} This made Litterick the first Communist to be elected, thanks to Manitoba’s complicated balloting system, to a provincial legislature.

\textsuperscript{216} Ibid., 114.
\textsuperscript{217} Penner, \textit{Canadian Communism} 154.
\textsuperscript{218} \textit{Daily Clarion}, 30 July 1936, 1.
Throughout 1935 the Party sought to win middle-class support by emphasizing its alignment with the causes of progressivism and peace. Articles directed to the middle class and to intellectuals began to appear regularly in The Worker in the weeks before the October 14th federal election. They encouraged voters to support united front candidates, whether these were CCF or CPC. Two days before the election, “Sniper,” a regular Worker columnist, distinguished between progressive and reactionary forces in the election, and argued that the choice was not between capitalism or socialism, but capitalism or fascism. It was in the best interests of the middle class to support a united front socialist candidate because,

capitalist parties can bring the middle class man nothing but fascism ahead....Fascism, which has been defined [as] capitalism, plus murders, already rules in a number of countries. It is a reactionary movement born in capitalist decay, which will stop at nothing in the way of bloodshed and sadism to crush the revolutionary workers, thrust the moderates out of the way and take power to perpetuate a while longer and even worsen conditions of the people, including the middle class. And fascism will only bow to superior force.

In contrast, to vote for the united front candidate was to be a part of “the mighty progressive upsurge of the people leading to socialism.”

In 1935 middle-class artists and intellectuals were more readily accepted by the Party for what they were. The significance of art and cultural work expanded after the August 1935 Seventh CI Congress, and at the same time less importance was placed on the class dynamics out of which cultural work emerged. What became more important than establishing class solidarity in struggle was the positive portrayal of the working class as a progressive force. Less attention was paid to what proletarian art was and was not; greater attention was paid to the effect of cultural work in general in supporting progressivism and anti-fascist solidarity. At the most general level this was “socialism.” Debates about the relation of the artist or writer to the class struggle subsided. A new consensus around the need for support of the

---

Soviet Union and of socialism pushed the art versus propaganda debate off the pages of the CPC press. Socialist art was no longer valued primarily on the basis of the intervention the producer sought to make in class struggle. The test of a work was its effectiveness in making the case for an antifascist and anti-war alliance. This alliance was for socialism in the sense that the only alternative was fascism. Social democrats, so recently vilified as no different from fascists, were now considered an important element in the making of Canadian socialism.

***

Pronatalism was a principal thrust of the new Soviet constitution that was being worked out throughout Russia over the summer of 1936. The Canadian communist press carried reports and stories contrasting the poor state of babies in Canadian working-class families to the care lavished on Soviet mothers and children. While working-class families were deprived of basic nutrition and proper medical care in Canada, the standard of living for Soviet citizens, including their babies, was (reportedly) steadily rising. The *Daily Clarion* took care to explain to readers the section of the new constitution on family and marriage. The communist press clearly expected criticism of several key changes included in the proposed constitution. On 4 July 1936 an article titled “Marriage and Family in Russia” by Jessica Smith appeared in the *Daily Clarion*. Smith began by acknowledging that proposed changes to divorce, child support, and abortion constituted a reversal of earlier Soviet reforms that had removed social and legal barriers to each one of them. The proposed reforms re-established paternal responsibility for child support, and re-criminalized abortion and homosexuality. Women were under pressure to have children, and

---

more of them. To this end, laws provided “for the prohibition of abortions, except where medically necessary; increased state assistance to women giving birth and to mothers of large families; large scale extension of the system of maternity homes, crèches and kindergartens; severer penalties for willful refusal to pay for upkeep of children in case the parents are separated, and certain changes in divorce legislation.” The CPC press tried to counter readings of the new laws as a step backwards. Articles reporting on the new laws were written by women, from the perspective of women, in an effort to deflect criticism or skepticism about the state’s investment in pronatalism. In Smith’s report, for instance, she detailed the long public process behind drafting the laws, in which women had “freely participated.” She emphasized that the test of the law will be “whether it continues to answer the will and the needs of the people. If in operation it proves to be a hardship, the people will raise their voices against it, a new draft will be proposed and discussed, and a new law made to fit the needs of the times.”

The CPC press in Canada thus did not avoid the most controversial element of the reforms. It did take considerable care to obscure the fact that restriction of access to abortion meant that Soviet women’s control over their reproductive lives was being revoked. Press coverage put the evolution of Soviet law on abortion in the context of the country’s development. The prohibition of abortion represented progress in the Soviet Union and reaction in Canada. Acknowledging that the “prohibition of abortion comes as something of a shock to the women of the Western world who hailed the law of 1920 legalizing abortions as a great step forward in the emancipation of women,” Smith contrasted Western and Soviet societies. She indirectly chided Western women for not seeing the difference themselves. They had failed to look beyond their own lives. They had not grasped that the issue was not women’s rights or freedoms, but the vastly different qualities of motherhood in

---

capitalism and socialism, respectively. Soviet socialism was superior to Canadian capitalism; hence, it was erroneous to imply that restrictions on abortion there could in any sense be related to restrictions on abortion here. Soviet women were happier than Canadian women because, more than just being women, they were also workers. But they were also happier because as mothers they were empowered by the state’s support: “Our attitude toward this question has been determined by the conditions under which the women of America live. In a society where there is no security for the masses of the people, no government organized care of children, no adequate maternity laws, no general dissemination of birth control information, women must fight for the right to have abortions performed.”

At the centre of this argument was the deeply conservative idea that women’s reproductive function was key to their social identity. All women can be workers, all women are mothers (the non-procreative woman being the eccentric exception that proved the rule). In the *Daily Clarion*’s coverage of Soviet abortion law, the emphasis on the historical and political context in which reproduction unfolds obscured the question of reproductive freedom itself. These stories try to create a parallel that explains the difference, but women were not really their subject. Rather, it was the system – capitalism or socialism – that was presented as definitive for women’s reproductive role. Questions of reproductive freedom and sexual autonomy were avoided by such seemingly “structuralist” analysis.

A pre-emptive strategy of addressing the most controversial aspects of the new laws in order to de-fang criticism was clear in the early treatment of the new family and marriage laws. The issue of abortion was again historicized in an article published a week later. Concern for the way the coverage unfolded was indicated in the frequency and quality of the reports in which the new Soviet laws on family and reproductive matters were addressed. On 11 July the *Daily Clarion* published a

---

222 Ibid.
personal account by Nadezhda Krupskaya, Lenin’s widow, on the evolution of family law in the Soviet Union. Krupskaya reflected on the conditions in which earlier laws on marriage, children, and abortion had been formulated in 1919 and 1920. Krupskaya had been a key figure in establishing programs for maternal and child care. She had also been an educational activist and library promoter. She was sometimes called “Russia’s mother.” As Lenin’s widow, her authority was considerable. Citing Krupskaya in connection to the draft Soviet constitution was an effort to circumvent criticism and to portray the changes as a continuation of Lenin’s egalitarian Soviet policies on marriage and family.²²³

The caption for Krupskaya’s account was “New Motherhood, Soviet Laws Designed to Assist Women.” It was accompanied by a photograph of Lenin and Krupskaya (who in fact had no children) with two young children snuggled close. Krupskaya’s authority as the wife of Lenin and a longtime advocate for Soviet women and children lent credence to Stalin’s pronatalist policies. Her discussion of the connection between Lenin’s policies on marriage and family and the new laws on marriage and family is nonetheless rather ambiguous — perhaps an indication that she was being bullied into becoming the new constitution’s cheer leader. Krupskaya put the needs of the CPSU first in her analysis. The new laws represented the will of Soviet women, as discerned in many conferences. Men and women had participated equally in shaping the law. And could the government have responsibly not attended to the majority opinion? “[A]cceding to large numbers of requests from working women regarding the harmfulness of abortions, the Government of the U.S.S.R., with the aim of protecting the health of working women, has prepared a draft law on the prohibition of abortions,” Krupsakaya remarked, and then went on to note that

²²³ For Lenin, women’s involvement in social labour in socialism would eliminate their identification with the family. In socialism, parents’ responsibility for children is shared by the state. Lenin discussed relations between men and women, and between parents and children, as related to and symptomatic of historical progress. For Lenin, in the same way that socialism offered workers the means of moving beyond their identity as workers, it offered to women and men the means to move beyond gender roles based in class and patriarchal domination. See V.I. Lenin, The Emancipation of Women: from the Writings of V.I. Lenin (New York: International Publishers, 1978).
the Government had also committed to policies “increasing assistance for mothers and large families, widely increasing the number of maternity homes, nurseries and kindergartens, increasing the criminal punishment for deliberately refusing to pay for the upkeep of children and changing the legislation on divorce.”

Krupskaya presented the 1919 reforms decriminalizing abortion, easing divorce, and dissolving the distinction of illegitimacy as merely provisional responses to the dire emergency situation following Russia’s involvement in the First World War and subsequently its own Civil War. This interpretation helped to explain why legal statutes that were the very opposite of Lenin’s were required in 1936. Lenin had attempted to put Soviet citizens on an equal legal footing, making provision for overcoming the social differences (such as those arising from sex). The 1936 constitution, in contrast, was based on the idea that these differences were constitutive. State policies that supported mothers in having more children would enable female citizens to do more of what they wanted to do (have babies) and more easily be who they really were (mothers and workers). Krupskaya’s part in easing the reception of Stalin’s deeply pronatalist program was to present it as the will of Soviet women themselves, and as “following the behest of Lenin” – a rhetorical mission perhaps only this particular venerable old Bolshevik could carry out with such authority, if not conviction.

***

An increasing reliance on the metaphor of Soviet society as a body to be defended against disease and degradation accompanied the slow and uneven evolution away from the revolutionary politics of the early Soviet Union to the bureaucratic style of party leadership that was entrenched with the 1936 “Stalin”

---

225 Ibid.
constitution. The image of Soviet society as a healthy body, an organic unity able to repel the onslaught of disease supplied a sense of wholeness and interconnection to Soviet life. The image of robust health offered comfort and encouragement to Soviet citizens and helped mobilize their support for the new state. In the atmosphere of constant change that accompanied modernization and agricultural collectivization, the Party constantly asserted its knowledge and authority. Soviet citizens were fully justified in identifying with so wise and farsighted a state, the guardian of the robust proletarian body, defender of the family, and punisher of those who would contaminate and harm its citizens. Even its most radical and drastic actions could be justified, in large part, as ones it was called upon to perform in order to defend the organic health of the Soviet body politic.²²⁶

Increasingly over the 1930s, the leadership of the CPSU saw enemies everywhere: within its borders and in the Party itself, in every capitalist state, and especially in Germany and Japan. The Moscow Trials lent apparent substance to the idea that the revolution was in peril. The massive purges that ensued, affecting Party, Army, and civil society, could be constructed almost as medical “purges” of defective and bad elements, administered by a paternal state. In August 1936 the first of the Moscow Trials opened. The Communist Press, both in the Soviet Union and in Canada, was suffused with bodily imagery. The figures on trial – Radek, Zinoviev and (in absentia) Trotsky – were portrayed as predators determined to corrupt Soviet integrity. The claim that Stalin was himself the target of assassination plots devised by Trotsky, Radek and Zinoviev made the danger seem real and immediate.

²²⁶ The important role of ideology and narrative in stitching together inconsistent historical formations is discussed in Sedgwick’s Between Men. She discusses the discursive relation of family and capitalism: “The phrase ‘A man’s home is his castle’ offers a nicely condensed example of ideological construction in this sense. It reaches back to an emptied-out image of mastery and integration under feudalism in order to propel the male wage-worker forward to further fears of alienated labor, in the service of a now atomized and embattled, but all the more intensively idealized home.” Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Between Men, English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 14–15. Critics of Soviet socialism claimed that the CPSU stood for the destruction of the family, while proponents argued that Soviet socialism was the only way to save the family from capitalism’s destructiveness. The two discourses mirrored one another.
The 1936 trial of Zinoviev, Kamenev and fourteen other CPSU officials was reported extensively in the *Daily Clarion*. Coverage was supplied by the CPSU’s paper, *Pravda*, the American Communist publications *The New Masses*, the *Daily Worker* and the Yiddish *Morgen Freiheit*, and by the CPC’s own correspondent in Moscow (1936-1939), Pat Forkin.²²⁷ Forkin arrived in Moscow in July, in time to prepare for covering the trial that began on 19 August. Forkin’s account of the process of Soviet justice was glowing, but no more so than other CP aligned correspondents. The CPSU was portrayed as threatened by corrupt elements seeking to mislead Soviet workers. These elements were charged with plotting to assassinate Stalin, seeking to restore capitalism and attempting to undermine the CPSU’s leadership and authority. Members of what CPSU officials called the “United Centre Trotskyite-Zinoviev Bloc” were described as parasites upon the body of the proletariat and the Party. Headlines in the *Daily Clarion* assured Canadian readers that in the Soviet Union, the “Masses Acclaim Extermination of Murderers.”²²⁸ Typical of the popular response to the trials as reported by *Pravda* was a letter from a group of women workers that was republished in the *Daily Clarion*: “These pitiful degenerates forgot that Stalin is the embodiment of the workers, the farmers, the toiling Soviet intelligentsia, that Stalin is the whole Soviet people.”²²⁹ The disgrace of the “wreckers” highlighted the authority and integrity of the Party and (the coverage claimed) affirmed the faith of workers in Stalin’s paternal leadership.

²²⁷ Born in 1903 Pat Forkin emigrated with his family to Brandon, Manitoba, in 1912. His entire family was active in the CPC. Stephen Forkin was part of the coal miners’ strike at Bienfait, Alberta, where three RCMP were killed. Joe Forkin was a prominent municipal politician in Winnipeg in the 1930s. Pat Forkin had tuberculosis from a young age. His involvement with the CPC was as a speaker and writer. He began his writing career as the Brandon correspondent for the *Clarion* in 1930-31, and moved to Winnipeg shortly after. From there he was recruited to Toronto, to work full time for the CPC’s new paper, the *Daily Clarion*. In Toronto, Forkin had his own weekly column, ‘Sauce for the Goose.’ His health remained precarious. The decision to send him to Moscow in 1936 was in part to receive better medical care for his tuberculosis. Forkin covered the Moscow Trials and other aspects of Soviet life. He spent considerable time in sanatoria between 1936 and 1939, and died in one on 12 December 1939. Errol Black, “The Forkin Letters,” *Manitoba History*, no. 56 (October 2007): 52-55. For Forkin’s role in the strikes at Bienfait and Estevan, see Stephen J. Endicott, *Bienfait: The Saskatchewan Miners’ Struggle of ’31* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).

²²⁸ See *Daily Clarion*, 20 August 1936, 1, 2.

²²⁹ *Daily Clarion*, 26 August 1936, 2.
In case any Canadian readers missed this aspect of the story, Soviet workers’ reverence for Stalin was reported repeatedly and effusively.

The outcome of the trials – conviction of all the accused and execution of most – was reported in the CP press as confirmation, not of official paranoia and persecution, but of Soviet power, competence, and legality. The trials were also treated as evidence for the necessity of closing ranks in defence of socialism; all supporters of the Soviet Union and socialism were to be on guard against traitors and betrayers. In 1938 Japan and Germany were the primary threats to Soviet security. Yet there were other worrying indications of capitalist imperialism, such as the unwillingness of France and England to form alliances with the Soviet Union, which contrasted vividly with the ever-more-evident alliances consolidating among right-wing regimes.

The CP press in Canada brought a vivid but one-dimensional story of Soviet socialism to its Canadian readers. Writers such as Forkin borrowed the familial metaphors that infused official Soviet discourse. They reiterated the idea of the Soviet Union as the fatherland of international socialism, one made all the more vivid now that this paternal entity was in peril. Canadian Party officials understood their role as one of leadership of the workers’ movement in Canada, but as importantly, as the dissemination of Soviet socialism. Their job was the articulation of political strategy and policy as these were endorsed by Stalin and the CI. Vigilance against “Trotskyite” influence was a constant theme in the CPC’s work. The CPC leaders’ experiences in 1929 with Maurice Spector and in 1931 with Sergeant John Leopold provided evidence, in their eyes, that even the small Canadian movement must guard against treachery. Emphasis of the constant possibility of incursion by elements ‘foreign’ to real (Soviet) socialism helped Canadian members persevere in their certainty of the undiluted goodness of Stalin’s leadership.
In mid-January, 1935, Grant Smith, a reporter for the *Toronto Telegram*, sat down to write a long letter to his friend and former lover Dorothy Livesay. Married and with an infant son, Smith was writing to Livesay as the latter was recovering from illness. Although not a party member, he was definitely part of a broader circle that listened to what the CPC said on the questions of the day. Smith used the occasion of a recent broadcast about King George VI and Queen Mary’s Silver Jubilee celebration to register some of his thoughts about what he thought was one of the defining characteristics of Canadians: their tendency to compromise.

I was invited to hear it by a couple who hung thrilled over every detail of the broadcast. He had been out of work for months and their condition had been that of so many families.

I was suddenly conscious of the thousands of people following the event, thrilling to the ritual and pageant and blinding themselves to their own position and condition in the occurrence which actually meant no more to them than an event in Mars. I could not be angry at the stupidity because it was too sad.

It was an impressive show even over the air. Its gaudy brightness brought into sharper relief for the moment all the misery, squalor and injustice of the order of which it was the fruit. The feudal forms meaningless for two centuries and the ecclesiastical ritual, with its dead beauty, stank.

It was, I thought, probably one of the last royal pageants. Possibly it will be historic as one of the final flashes of the system it represents before its crash, but pathetically hundreds of thousands of poor humans like my hosts were being caught by the glitter and forgetting themselves.

It is typical of the situations which so frequently arouse complex feelings in me. Pious folk, scraping less than a bare existence out of long hours at uninteresting and degrading work, still carefully training their children to be good and faithful, respecting their exploiters and preserving a pathetic faith in the rightness of things.

Canadians are still too respectable, too reverent and credulous to do any realistic thinking for themselves. They will shout for the
substance but gladly compromise on the shadow if it is offered to them.  

The “hosts” (and by extension, the Canadians) Smith describes here are not, for all their need to economize, the workers and working-class families in Toronto. This vividly-depicted Toronto couple is middle-class. How, Smith seemed to be asking, could this powerful web of images, this religion of compromise and monarchism, with its “pathetic faith in the rightness of things,” ever be challenged?

Like Livesay’s correspondent, the CPC and Depression-era leftists in general began to awaken to a palpable but little-discussed sociological phenomenon of their time: the consolidation and new self-consciousness of the metropolitan middle class, all those people whose livelihoods depended not upon labour directly for capitalist industry nor in profiting from those who did, but rather in the burgeoning service occupations, the white-collar trades, and other “middlemost” socio-economic positions. How should a CPC philosophically committed to the dictatorship of the proletariat relate to such non-proletarians? Middle-class individuals had always been welcomed into the Party, but membership required shedding their identification with bourgeois culture, principles and institutions. In the 1930s, the economic crisis and the rise of fascism abroad and, seemingly, at home, shook many Canadians in their faith in the existing social and economic order. How could they be reached? How could Smith’s radio-listening couple be encouraged to turn the dial to something more revolutionary?

Throughout 1935, revolutionary working-class politics were steadily sidelined. The CPC emphasized the community of interests that existed between the labouring and middle classes. The CPC certainly did not abandon “class analysis” — throughout the federal election of 1935 it had hammered home the need to reject the priorities and privileges of the capitalist class. Yet, in the Popular Front era, such class analysis

---

^30 Dorothy Livesay fonds, Grant Smith to Livesay, 16 January 1935.
carried different implications than it had before. The CPC would no longer aspire to be the vanguard of a proletarian army, vanquishing other parties and classes. Now it saw itself as taking its direction from the working class as well as leading it, and helping to elect labour and united front candidates. In 1935, the CPC endorsed CCF candidates and shelved the issue of its exclusive political leadership of the labour movement. This shift from sectarianism and the emphasis on progressivism took place just as the Canadian middle class was becoming more receptive to the argument against capitalism and for socialism. The two phenomena were related and mutually reinforcing.

By the end of 1934 antifascism had become the organizing force behind the CPC’s appeal to middle-class Canadians. Earlier antifascism had been tied to revolutionary class politics through directly associating capitalism with fascism. As the united front became the Popular Front Against Fascism, the association between capitalism and fascism receded. Although class war rhetoric survived within the CPC, progressivism and antifascism were more salient themes. The Party’s 1935 federal election slogan was “Make the Rich Pay,” and central to its platform was “The Workers’ Bill” that included non-contributory unemployment and social insurance. The bill was to be introduced in Parliament by the communist M.P.s who would be elected on October 14th. The preamble to the bill reflected the Party’s emphasis on the family as the crucible in which the not-employed and the unemployed were becoming socialists:

Whereas the homes, the families and the basis for the very existence of hundreds of thousands of workers have already been destroyed or are seriously menaced as a result of mass unemployment and other causes that deprive willing workers of the opportunity to work and earn a livelihood for themselves and their dependents...  

231 “Vote for Peace,” The Worker, Saturday, 12 October 1935, 1.
Throughout the campaign the CPC press broadcast workers’ alignment with the cause of international peace and social welfare, and dramatized each cause by contrasting Canada and its capitalist leaders to the Soviet Union.

Before 1935 the Party had passively sought middle-class support, accepting the efforts of those individuals who ‘went over’ to the workers’ cause and aligned themselves with the working class. After 1935, when the CPC identified its core cause as the struggle against war and fascism, it became necessary to cultivate a broader basis on which the Canadian middle class could identify and align itself with labour’s cause. After 1935, a priority of the Party was to convince middle-class Canadians that the future – their future as a society, not just their futures as individuals – lay in the struggle for socialism. In the early Popular Front years, this opening towards the middle class coexisted, uneasily at times, with the CPC’s older anti-capitalist themes, such as proletarian dictatorship and the necessity of extraparliamentary struggle. As time went on, and especially as the CCF, notwithstanding significant hesitations, came out against an alliance with Communists, the CPC tightened its embrace of the middle class. More and more, it raised the banners, not of the class struggle and revolutionary dictatorship, but of family, nation, and tradition.

Elsewhere, in the U.S. and France, this new emphasis could be, awkwardly, articulated with the respective country’s revolutionary heritage. In the Canadian case, the turn to such values entailed the articulation and dissemination of a much more evolutionary, even Whiggish, narrative about the cumulative building up of Canada’s wealth and greatness through labour. Neo-nationalist positions about “Canadian independence” that had raised Comintern eyebrows and Canadian tempers in the late 1920s returned to CPC texts, but this time with a difference: it was less a question of awakening a revolutionary proletarian movement to a sophisticated understanding of its geopolitical position, and more one of appealing
to a cross-class progressive sensibility. Undoubtedly the “traditionalists” have a point when they look at the line changes initiated in 1934/5 as evidence of their “Moscow rules” interpretation — but so do the “revisionists,” when they argue that any Comintern-imposed line change was necessarily adapted to, and in practice modified, in a given national setting.

The importance of Soviet socialism as leader and model remained definitive in communist discourse throughout the 1930s. But in the Popular Front intellectual members of the CPC were charged with the additional task of formulating socialism as Canadian. Historical, literary and dramatic work by Stanley Ryerson, Jean Watts, Dorothy Livesay, Betty Ratz, Mary Quayle Innis, and Margaret Fairley, all university-trained, middle-class, mostly young new members, refocused Canadian history as the story of the people who had ploughed its fields and built its industries.

An important component of the new emphasis on middle-class Canadians was the CPC’s growing emphasis on students and youth. This development was not entirely new — the Young Worker and the Young Communists went back to the 1920s, and such work had been pursued throughout the Third Period. The original Student League of Canada consisted of both YCL members and the Spartacus Youth Club, but the commingling of Trotskyist and Stalinist-oriented students proved untenable and YCL members sought control of the group. In April 1933 the Young Worker carried a three-part series titled “The Canadian Student Movement” which detailed this process. It claimed that the Student League of Canada had, after much struggle, been put firmly on its feet. The Canadian chapter was formed as a branch of the American National Student League and followed the NSL model in organizing a student movement along practical, activist and inclusive lines. The work of establishing this movement on the campus of the University of Toronto amounted to a new front for the YCL and the CPC, both of which had tended in the past to

---

232 This was achieved by February of 1933, and announced in editorials in The Young Worker and the league’s journal, The Spark.
see university students as irredeemably bourgeois. The Canadian Student League was modeled closely on the American example, centered in the City College of New York. Reflecting the working-class background of much of CCNY’s student population, the student movement in the U.S. combined a class-based critique of capitalism, support for the Soviet Union and opposition to war as interlocked elements of the political struggle for necessary change. Early in February of 1931 a new journal titled *Frontiers* had been launched at CCNY. The journal was the work of members of the Social Problems club and its first issue contained an editorial against compulsory Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) training on college campuses. The ensuing controversy led to the formation of the New York Student League in the fall of 1931, renamed the National Student League (NSL) in December. Robert Cohen has pointed out that from its formation, the NSL was deeply influenced by and indicative of emerging communist politics in the U.S. Many of the founders of the NSL were members of the YCL, where they had gained experience in organizing and activism. Cohen points out that despite the NSL’s close ties to the YCL, the CPUSA’s continuing emphasis in the early years of the 1930s on class-based organizing meant the league was left to its own devices and developed an independent line of political strategy and organization. It did not mechanically follow the strictly class-oriented emphasis on industrial organizing and sectarian leadership.

The events which led to the formation of the National Student League in December of 1931 had begun at a predominantly working-class campus, but the cause was widely taken up by students on other campuses, drawing in students from elite, working and middle class backgrounds. While the first convention of the National Student League in March 1932 was, according to Cohen, “all but ignored by the student press, which was still predominantly apolitical,” within two years its impact was undeniable: “The NSL pioneered a new approach to radical student organizing,
which would liberate the American student Left from its decade-long isolation and political impotence.”\textsuperscript{233}  Cohen traces the success of this movement to its emphasis on the protection of civil liberties, its campaign against militarism and war, and its emphasis on united front work rather than on class struggle. The framework remained a class-based analysis of capitalism, but this analysis was implemented discretely and strategically in campaigns directed against immediate problems and obvious contradictions directly linked to capitalism in 1932: the state’s role in suppressing American’s constitutional rights of free speech and association, and in maintaining military preparedness and war. Unlike the CPUSA’s highly sectarian pursuit of class struggle, the student movement attacked immediate problems, foregrounding action and organizing over theory. The movement spoke to students’ investment in skills, training and knowledge, pointing out that these were wasted in a system in which war and unemployment were necessary evils. It drew on students’ interest (and faith) in planning and management and pointed out that these were extensively applied only in the Soviet Union. It spoke to their future in asserting human development and social progress over capitalist crisis and decay.

The early months of the National Student League of Canada were contentious ones. In a series of articles published in the \textit{Young Worker} beginning 17 April 1933, Stanley Ryerson explained the history and importance of the group. He claimed that the idea for the league occurred to members of the Student League for Social Reconstruction in the summer of 1932. In the fall, the SLSR was re-formed as the Student League of Canada and began publishing a monthly student journal, \textit{The Spark}. Ryerson described the early approach taken by the League. He quoted from its founding program, which stated that the League’s purpose was “the two-fold object of exposing the inherent contradictions of capitalist society and of rallying the student to the support of the working class.” He criticized the League’s early work

\textsuperscript{233} Robert Cohen, \textit{When the Old Left Was Young: Student Radicals and America’s First Mass Student Movement, 1929-1941} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 30.
as sectarian and argued that “the interest of the mass of students” had not been “aroused” because of a sectarian emphasis on class struggle.\textsuperscript{234} Five members of the League attended the December 1932 National Student League convention in Chicago.\textsuperscript{235} Their participation in this convention set the Student League of Canada on a parallel course with the NSL, a course that diverged from CPC policy of the time in strategy and spirit. Ryerson’s article makes little of this important difference between the organizations, and in this illustrates a latitude that was unusual for the Communist movement. Jean Watts and Ryerson were the links between the Student League on campus and the YCL.

An editorial in the December issue of the Progressive Arts Club journal, \textit{Masses} welcomed the formation of the Student League of Canada and commended its “soundly Marxian” proposal “to take an active part in the class struggle, to protest Bennett’s policy of open terrorism against workers, to demand non-contributory insurance for unemployed workers and university graduates, to fight imperialist war, “and to popularize and defend the achievements of the Soviet Union.” But the writer went on to criticize the first issue of \textit{The Spark} for not paying enough attention to specifically student affairs, and in doing so acknowledged the student movement as a new and distinct arena of organizing. The editorial cautioned that “[i]f \textit{The Spark} wishes to contact the student body, it should do so by dealing extensively with the problems of the modern bourgeois university, on the correct tactical basis of raising immediate demands. The sectarianism shown in this first issue is more apt to repel than to attract sympathetic elements.”\textsuperscript{236} Over the winter of 1933 Watts and Ryerson battled this sectarianism in the Student League of Canada and began to build the

\textsuperscript{234} Stanley Ryerson, “The Canadian Student Movement,” \textit{Young Worker}, 17 April 1933.
\textsuperscript{236} “Student League of Canada,” \textit{Masses}, December 1932.
organization into a broad national movement, one that would be active in high schools, colleges and other universities.

Organizing the Student League of Canada proceeded in step with the program adopted at the NSL Chicago convention, which established opposition to military training and all aspects of war preparedness as the core of the student movement. In the first of the articles on the Canadian Student Movement Stanley Ryerson wrote for *The Young Worker* he acknowledged that “[f]rom the end of December up to last month, the work of the League (aside from the publishing of another number of *The Spark*, and the holding of a Theatre Night put on by the Workers’ Theatre) was practically paralyzed by an internal struggle on the question of the policy and nature of the organization.” Ryerson’s article was a declaration of victory insofar as he was able to report that the ‘sectarian’ character of the movement in Canada had been corrected. He concluded with the observation that “[o]n the whole, the anti-war work of the Student Leagues has been the most significant achievement so far. The success is due to the fact that it is an issue of immediate interest to students and has not been treated in the sectarian manner which has hindered certain other activities of the student movement.”

An editorial in the March-April 1933 issue of *Masses* announced that the SLC had achieved “the correct orientation.” The editorial suggested that the PAC had provided an important bridge between the university community, the new SLC and the unemployed and working-class elements in the Toronto Communist movement. It had happily transcended the approach of the Trotskyists, who had proceeded from a “false” emphasis on Marxian orthodoxy in their work — one that had led them to minimize the potential role of the middle class:

> They ignored the changing outlook of the crisis-hit middle class, whose economic base is shrinking and, particularly[,] how this radicalizes its younger articulate members, the students who

---

constitute the mass of the student body. They denied the tactical possibilities of many peculiarly student issues; they overlooked the maturing preconditions of a Fascist movement with its inevitable reflex in the university and hence the necessity to organize to counteract such a development.\textsuperscript{238}

In 1928-1929 YCL and younger members of the CPC had shifted the Party to a more radical and sectarian course. In 1932-1933, the shift away from sectarianism was also initiated and largely carried out by the youth section of the Party. The generally younger PAC members looked to new areas for organizing: Canadian culture and the universities. To ignore the revolutionary potential of these areas would, they argued, jeopardize a valuable sector of Canadian youth and stunt the growth of proletarian culture in Canada. The emphasis on culture would become more expansive and less precise as the Popular Front took shape after 1935. Rather than emphasizing the class character of culture, and seeing culture as a tool of (as opposed to a venue for) political change, the emphasis shifted to culture itself, to the idea that the health and vitality of culture (as venerable art and literature) required revolutionary political change. In looking back on the 1930s, Stanley Ryerson summarized this transition in cultural discourse on the Communist-aligned Left. Describing for labour historian Greg Kealey what led him to join the movement in 1932, Ryerson condenses what was an occasionally acrimonious debate amongst cultural activists in Canada: “The realization that the cultural values of art and literature were being turned by capitalism into what I can only describe as spiritual onanism and the discovery that communism, by solving the material problems of society, was the only path to a future creative renaissance, was the first impulse.”\textsuperscript{239} Ryerson’s comment aligns communism with health and normality by offering a (hetero)sexualized gloss on the “cultural values of art and literature.”

\textsuperscript{238} “Student League of Canada,” \textit{Masses}, March-April 1933, n.p.
\textsuperscript{239} Cited in Kealey, “Stanley Bréhaut Ryerson,” 50.
In his *Young Worker* articles on the formation of the SLC, Ryerson distilled the complex of issues confronting the early organization into clear categories. Past ‘errors’ in the SLC’s orientation were reduced to two problems: opportunism and sectarianism. Communist leadership of the student movement was crucial because its emerging dynamics mirrored the broader struggle between classes and the urgency of identifying where, on which side, one’s interests lay. In the second of his series on the student movement in Canada, published on 13 May 1933, Ryerson expanded upon his critique of sectarianism. In rushing to champion the proletarian cause in Canada, the League had neglected students themselves. The effort to establish the League on a revolutionary (and anti-reformist) footing had led to “exaggeration and leftism” in its approach to students, and, overall, to the neglect of students’ concerns. The League’s proper task “is to prepare students, politically, to take part in the working class struggle, to enter the organizations of the revolutionary vanguard of the working class.” Ryerson is describing a movement in which the acceptance of CPC leadership was the most important criterion for effectiveness. This enabled a shift away from class as the basis of political consciousness:

> The leaders of the Student League, very busy with being ‘real’ revolutionaries, failed completely to see that if students, who are only beginning to be politically conscious, are to be brought to a thorough understanding of the nature of capitalism and the revolutionary way out - they must be brought to it by first understanding their own position, their interests must be aroused on the basis of their own worries and situation.  

Yet, for all that this might seem to presage the Popular Front in its openness to middle-class issues, Ryerson’s tactical prescriptions of 1933 actually savoured more of the “united front from below” of the 1920s. He continued to reject the possibility of sharing leadership with the CCF, and in an article titled “What Does the CCF Offer Us, Paradise or a Blind Alley?” challenged the CCF leadership: “You are deceiving us

240 *Young Worker*, 13 May 1933, 7
gentlemen. Your NEW SOCIAL ORDER (without struggle, without hardship, through ‘co-operation’) is a sham!” Ryerson called the CCF leaders “demagogues” out to trick workers with words, and condemned CCF methods: “The path you show us is already soaked with the blood of misled workers. It leads to the paralysis of the working class movement - it leads to Fascism!” The contrast between revolution and reform continued to be emphasized at every level of CP discourse, at every opportunity, and social democrats continued to be depicted as the handmaidens of fascism. Ryerson’s article appeared just before the founding convention of the CCF in Regina, and its objective was to discount the CCF’s capacity for political leadership. Ryerson contrasted Communist actions to CCF words. He aligned the Party with concrete struggle, the CCF with passivity and compliance with bourgeois power. Organized and explained as progress versus reaction, democracy versus fascism, the CPC’s leadership was presented as simple, strong, and universal. The CPC represented progress, goodness, health; the CCF duplicity, decay and workers’ despair. The urgency of the threat to working-class unity posed by the CCF left no room for dialectical finesse.

In the final installment of his series on the student movement, Ryerson blamed “Morris (sic) Spector and other renegades from the working class movement” for retarding the growth of the student movement in Canada. These followers of Trotsky -- the “High Priest of counterrevolution” in Ryerson’s opinion -- had caused a wasteful paralysis of the movement over the winter of 1932-1933. Thankfully, they had undergone a “crushing defeat” at the hands of the YCL-affiliated members of the SLC. The argument for building an organization based on the interests of students as students was their affinity with the working class, and their identification with proletarian hegemony would develop in the course of their political engagement.

241 S. Ryerson, “What Does the CCF Offer Us, Paradise or a Blind Alley?” Young Worker, 30 June 1933, 4.
as students and youth. Despite this recognition of substantive unity as the necessary basis of affiliation between the student and communist movements, the objective remained sectarian politics and CPC leadership. Ryerson’s analysis of the student movement remained defined and driven by the CPC imperatives of marginalizing Trotskyist influence (the obliteration of the International Left Opposition) and building support for the Soviet Union and the project of socialism in one country.

In 1932 Stalin had begun to re-define the relations between political and cultural work more closely. Reflecting this influence, Ryerson addressed the significance of culture and of proletarian cultural activism in Canada in his final article:

The cultural crisis of capitalist society, developing out of the economic collapse, will have to be dealt with, explained and the character of the proletarian cultural revolution clearly brought before the students; the achievements of the Soviet Union must be popularized (very little has been attempted in this direction); and the economic situation of the students must be studied, and conclusions drawn.  

Students’ particular investment in and identification with culture -- as science and art -- was thought to constitute a good basis upon which to build their attachment to Communism and to the Soviet Union, where both were flourishing. (Interestingly, it was not their present or future workplace relations that were at issue -- it was their more abstract attachment to culture.) While the SLC had to be organized on the basis of students’ interests and their identification with the movement as students, Ryerson made it clear that Soviet and CP leadership remained central to the League’s success. Like the YCL, like the CPC itself, the true socialist knew that he or she must be guided by the international movement, which was in turn piloted by Stalin.

***

---

242 R.S., “The Canadian Student Movement - III,” The Young Worker, 30 June 1933, 8.
An important facet of the Communists’ bid for support amongst youth was the Party’s struggle for peace. Once again, there was an evolution over time, from a Third Period position highly critical of bourgeois pacifism to a Popular Front conception of peace in which war and “warmongering” were increasingly reviled as fascist evolutionary throwbacks. Over the summer of 1932, the YCL organized a campaign to elect a delegate to the first World Youth Congress Against War and Fascism, to be held in Paris in early August. The Toronto conference chose Joe Derry, recently charged under Section 98, in a show of support intended to publicize his trial. The Hamilton conference chose Peter Hunter, a young worker from Hamilton. The YCL sold ballots for each candidate, and the winner was announced at a youth rally in Toronto’s Bellwoods Park on 25 July. The winner was Peter Hunter. Hunter’s efforts as a speaker to labour and progressive groups in Hamilton had made him a respected and popular figure in the working-class youth movement.

When he won the contest to be the delegate to the First World Youth Congress, Hunter was not yet a member of the YCL. He arrived in Toronto to speak at the rally and pick up his passage tickets from the YCL’s office on College Street, where he met Jean Watts and other leading members of the YCL. After the congress in Paris, Hunter had no money for his return passage. He accepted the offer of payment for speaking engagements in several English cities. In London he stayed with a group of students, probably arranged through Watts, who had friends studying at the LSE and other British universities. Hunter described this stay as his “first contact with bohemianism which was then unknown in Hamilton. I couldn’t become accustomed to breakfasts of cold fish and chips and warm beer. Even worse I couldn’t stand listening, late into the night and early morning, to poetry which didn’t rhyme. I was a very conservative radical.”

Hunter became active with the YCL after his return from France and England in December 1933. He went on a

---

speaking tour and then worked with party activists to organize the Canadian Youth League Against War and Fascism.

Youthful idealism was also attracted by the struggle to free CPC prisoners. Efforts to win the release of the imprisoned CPC leaders began to pay off in the summer of 1934. One of the first to be released, Sam Carr, arrived by train at Union Station on 7 July.²⁴⁴ The YCL claimed that more than two thousand workers turned out for the welcome rally and march up University Avenue to Queen’s Park. The Young Worker described the actions of the police, “[s]winging clubs and blackjacks, riding their horses straight at the crowd of workers, 30 police and plainclothesmen broke up a peaceful sidewalk parade of workers.”²⁴⁵

Near the end of that summer, on 4 and 5 August, the Canadian Youth League Against War and Fascism was formed at a conference at the Central Technical High School on Harbord Street. The Young Worker reported that 275 conference delegates representing 150,000 Canadian youth attended. Most importantly, the delegates represented “young people of all shades of political and religious opinions, from Young Christians to the Young Socialist and Young Communist League.”²⁴⁶ Delegates pledged themselves to support the united front against fascism and war. The conference itself was acclaimed as a “tremendously important step” in bringing “young Canadian workers, farmers, students, and middle class people” together. The Young Worker proclaimed that their support for the pledge and the newly-formed CYLWF was “living proof the young people all over the country in the overwhelming majority desire unity, and will fight to see that it is achieved.”²⁴⁷ The Young Communist League District Convention was held just before the conference. At all

²⁴⁴ Tomo Cacic had been released earlier, but deported to Yugoslavia. His ‘release’ was certainly not hailed as a victory for the CPC.
²⁴⁵ “Police Attack Carr Welcome,” Young Worker, 9 July 1934, 1.
²⁴⁶ “CCF and Communist Youth Unite Against War and Fascism,” Young Worker, Monday, August 13, 1934, 1. A report on the same page noted the first Student League of Canada National Conference, held August 5-7.
²⁴⁷ “The Next Step,” Young Worker, 13 August 1934, 3.
of these conferences, the theme of building the youth movement against war and fascism was pre-eminent. Opposition to the YCL delegates’ proposals for a united front came from Trotskyist delegates whom the *Young Worker* described as “hare-brained,” “self-styled revolutionaries,” “renegades from Communism.” and “sterile.” But in fact, YCL members’ new enthusiasm for united front work with *all* stripes of opinion also continued to fall on deaf ears in the CCF camp. The Co-operative Youth Movement had just had its own first national convention, in Regina, at which they debated a motion to support the proceedings of the All Canadian Youth Congress Against War and Fascism. As reported in the *Young Worker*, this motion was amended by delegates representing “the parliamentary hacks of the CCF and their careerist followers among the youth,” so that the motion eventually passed only vaguely supported the spirit, rather than the practical resolutions, of the Toronto conference.\(^{248}\) The *Young Worker* made much of its idea of “two paths” emerging in the CCF movement, of discord between those who supported the “rotten bourgeois parliamentarianism of Woodsworth and Co. and the desire of young workers for struggle.”\(^{249}\)

***

The CPC from 1935 to 1942 can be grasped, in part, as a living paradox. On the one hand, there was a palpable opening up to middle-class, big-city youths, intellectuals, and reformers of many descriptions, with all that entailed in terms of a new emphasis on gradualness, nation-building, and respectability. On the other hand, this was also the era of High Stalinism, with its cults of personality, sacred texts, and purge trials. An early indication that Bolshevik forms of Party organization and authority remained intact within the post-1935 CPC was a Political Bureau resolution

---

\(^{248}\) “Trotskyite Sect Fails to Split Youth congress,” *Young Worker*, 13 August 1934, 3.

\(^{249}\) “CCYM Youth Must Decide: Convention Shows Two Paths,” *Young Worker*, 13 August 1934, 3.
on a verification campaign that commenced in January 1939. The resolution
disingenuously claimed that the purpose of the campaign was not “a sort of spy hunt”
but designed to facilitate the rapid education and promotion of “loyal, able men and
women” for leadership. Local personnel committees were instructed to compose
short biographical reports on “all comrades holding leading positions in mass,
cultural and fraternal organizations of the foreign born Canadians.” The Political
Bureau’s resolution noted that this move to provide members of personnel
committees with characterizations of leading party workers was aimed at identifying
and overcoming “chauvinist nationalist elements” among workers. Notwithstanding
the claims of 1935 that the national parties would be much freer to pursue their own
paths, the Canadian campaign was modeled strictly on a similar process in the Soviet
Union, undergoing waves of official paranoia about minority nationality that would
culminate in many deaths. Adding to this sense of internal insecurity, Stalin’s report
to the Eighteenth Congress of the CPSU in early March 1939 indicated the distance
that had grown between leading capitalist countries and the Soviet Union. The
Soviet Union had been unable to secure an alliance against Germany with France or
Great Britain. In his speech to the congress, Stalin attacked British imperialism as
the source of international insecurity and German audacity, and blamed Franco’s
success in the Spanish Civil War on British neutrality. Yet even as class-based
politics were reasserted in the face of the Soviet Union’s continued international
isolation in 1939, some aspects of party work characteristic of the earlier period were
not resurrected.

News of the 24 August 1939 Treaty of Non-Aggression Between Germany and
the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact) was widely
reported in the Canadian press. The treaty created confusion amongst members.

---

250 Kenny Collection, Box 9, Folder 7, “Resolution of the Political Bureau on the Verification
Campaign, January 1939,” 1.
251 Greg Kealey and Reg Whitaker, The R.C.M.P Security Bulletins; the Depression Years (St. John’s, Nfld:
Canadian Committee on Labour History, c 1993-1997), 394.
While the CPC tried to minimize any display of discord or division within the party, the impact of the Treaty on the CPC’s internal strength and public support was devastating. It has been argued that this move squandered the popular support the CPC had gathered through its work in support of workers and the unemployed during the Depression. It has been characterized as a move which went against the CPC’s own political interests, not least because it illustrated the CPC’s continued domination by the CI. In their memoirs, Party members generally avoid such hyperbolic assessments. They recount their experience of internment or going underground. What is clear is that the alliance with bourgeois democracies in the Popular Front Against Fascism ended following the Soviet invasion of Poland on 17 September 1939. There are few Party documents from this period. None offers detail on what people in the Party were saying and writing about the war situation and the Soviet Union. Facing suppression under the Defence of Canada Act, the Daily Clarion ceased publication in November, 1939 and its place was taken in January 1940 by the Canadian Tribune. Under A.A. MacLeod’s judicious editorship, the paper positioned itself as “a journal of democratic opinion.” Although the Canadian Tribune fought (mostly successfully) to remain in circulation, it could provide little guidance to CPC members during the early, “Phony War” phase of the world’s latest global conflict, except to promulgate a line that, in essence, returned the CPC to the militant isolation of the Third Period.

In the autumn of 1939 the CPC’s slogan was “The People Want Peace.” The necessity of denouncing the war against Hitler as an inter-imperialist contest for power and resources did not mean that Party members departed from their opposition to fascism, but critics claimed the CPC was now aligned with the twin evils of Stalin’s Soviet communism and Hitler’s National Socialist fascism. In the face of such efforts to discredit its politics, the CPC leadership maintained that it was the only true representative of “the Canadian people,” and affirmed the link
between communism and Canadian nationalism the Party had developed in the
happier days of the Popular Front. For the CPC the interests of ‘the Canadian
People’ were identical with the defence of the socialist fatherland.

When the CPC was banned by order in council in June 1940, top members
had already gone underground. Some were in Toronto and Montreal, but key
leaders, such as Tim Buck, went to New York, Buffalo and Detroit. Tim Buck sent
letters and articles from New York, where he was living in the Bronx and active with
the CPUSA, including meetings with Earl Browder. In his memoir, *Yours in the
Struggle*, Buck described the fraught and ultimately fruitless efforts of the CPC
political leadership to come to an official position on the outbreak of war, and claims
that disagreement continued amongst the members of the CPC national executive
until Germany invaded the Soviet Union on June 22 1941. At the time, no such
disagreements were publicized outside the CPC’s inner circle. Varying
interpretations and positions with respect to the war emerged, but until the spring of
1941, all of these urged Canadians not to support this latest imperialist adventure.
Indeed, a group of younger members (including Ryerson, then underground in
Montreal) argued that the situation offered Canada an opportunity to wrest its
independence from British imperialism.\(^{252}\)

From New York Tim Buck followed a more orthodox line. In the midst of
the CPC’s official dispersal, a new journal was formed. This was the *Monthly Review*,
designed to provide members with in-depth analysis and detailed political guidance.
The first issue contained an article by Buck in which he offered an authoritative
rendering of the new situation:

> The close collaboration of British and American imperialists, in
> spite of their mutual antagonisms and without renouncing their
> conflicting imperialist aims, is a phenomenon of profound
> significance. It is unquestionable that the United States imperialists
> hope to secure the victors’ share in the exploitation of Britain’s vast

\(^{252}\) Buck, *Yours in the Struggle*, especially 290–293.
Buck described the war as primarily about the preservation of the British Empire, into which the U.S. was bound to bite deeply following a postwar international restructuring. The vulnerability of the empire exposed capitalism’s weakness and provided an opportunity for proletarian revolution. Through working-class opposition to the war, international capitalism would be divided and in crisis. The rivalry of imperialist governments would leave capitalist states vulnerable to organized proletarian revolution within their borders. Building opposition to the war increased the revolutionary potential of the international situation.

A stringent and unconcealed class politics informed Buck’s announcement in 1941 that the CPC’s fight was “first of all – against the rapacious, profit-hungry, cynically philistine capitalist class in Canada, which, with its lackies, the social reformist traitors to the working class, is selling the Canadian masses up the river for the privilege of sharing the profits with both Wall Street and the British imperialists.” This declamation appeared shortly after the Canadian Party was banned, a development for which the CPC had planned.

In striking these hard-line positions, Buck and other CPC leaders were inspired by the 1939 International Publishers edition of the official History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks). In New York, Buck had immediate access to the book, and his 1940 article, titled “The Science of Proletarian Revolution,” reflected its influence. In this Buck stated that “in the perfection of its exposition of the substance of the theory [Marxism Leninism], of its application

254 Ibid., 13.
255 Buck drew courage and authority in his writing for the *Monthly Review* from the *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks)*. This text was authorized by Stalin and, subsequent research suggests, in large part written by him.
to concrete problems under varying conditions that the teaching of the History is universal and indispensable to communists today.\textsuperscript{256} The History has been read as a doctrinaire rendering of recent Soviet history and Stalinist strategy, yet aside from its historical or theoretical demerit, the History was also significant in that it reasserted the vanguard role of the Party. In the Soviet Union, class difference had been speedily reduced to the point where bourgeois power was eradicated. The History even claimed that the Soviet Union had, through the CPSU’s leadership, transformed itself into a socialist state of workers and peasants, “two friendly classes.”\textsuperscript{257} In contrast, Canada continued to be dominated by both national and international capital. Tim Buck urged Canadian Party members to study the Soviet example. Buck’s exuberant praise of the History indicates how important it was to have – and to express – absolute certainty in Soviet leadership and authority at a time when the CPC was underground, divided physically and politically. In these difficult circumstances Buck drew on Soviet authority to bolster his own claim to speak for the CPC. When he described the “substantive contribution” of the History as “its brilliant expositions of the method and style of work by which Lenin and Stalin used the science of Marxism-Leninism” and underlined the importance of Communists’ acquiring a “correct understanding” and “mastery” of this science, Buck was engaged both in building up the confidence of his followers and sowing doubt and fear among potential dissenters who might champion an unauthorized view of recent events. The importance of the CPC consisted in its capacity to apply Marxist-Leninist science to concrete problems and to guide Canadian workers along a path already mapped out by Lenin and Stalin. Clearly, Buck had read the History as a testament to Stalin’s leadership, and approvingly noted the “emphasis upon the evolutionary continuity of the social process as a whole with emphasis upon the dialectics of the


\textsuperscript{257} See History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks), Chapter Twelve (Toronto: Progress Publishers, 1939).
struggle which confronts revolutionary leadership with the need for sharp changes of orientation or tactics from time to time...” To the Canadian members who harboured reservations about the Nazi-Soviet pact and the CPC’s opposition to the war, Buck in essence instructed them to remember that Father -- i.e., Stalin, the CPSU, and the CPC -- Knew Best.

Germany’s attack on the Soviet Union, beginning on 22 June 1941, transformed both the CPC’s position on the war, and the Party’s position in relation to the Canadian state -- and by inference the middle class and the Liberal Party it would soon so often support. The CPC leadership shifted from opposing the war as imperialistic to wholeheartedly endorsing the Allied countries. Many CPC members went directly from exile or imprisonment to enlistment with the Canadian Armed Forces.258 The alliance of the Soviet Union with Great Britain, Canada, France and the United States enabled CPC members to resume their alliance against fascism with all progressive elements, regardless of political affiliation or class identification. The Popular Front, abruptly suspended in 1939, was back in operation -- even intensified and broadened -- in 1941.

Tim Buck closed his 1940 exposition on the ‘History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks) with a quote from Stalin’s 1937 speech “Mastering Socialism.” In this speech, Stalin used the myth of Antaeus to describe the relation between the Communist Party and the Russian people. He said that the Bolsheviks “like Antaeus are strong because they maintain their connection with their mother, the masses, who gave birth to them, suckled them and reared them. And, as long as they maintain connection to the mother, with the people, they have every chance of remaining invincible. That is the key to the invincibility of Bolshevik leadership.”259

258 As members of the forces, they were closely watched by the RCMP. See Greg Kealey and Reg Whitaker, The R.C.M.P Security Bulletins: The Depression Years (St. John’s: Canadian Committee on Labour History, c 1993-1997). Also invaluable is Reg Whitaker, "Official Repression of Communism During World War II,” Labour/Le Travail, no. 17 (Spring 1986): 135-166.
259 T.B., “The Science of Proletarian Revolution,” citations at 12, 13, 18, 20. In the myth, Antaeus’ strength is derived from contact with his mother, Gaia or earth.
Stalin likens the Communist Party’s relation to the masses with Antaeus’ relation to his mother, the earth. In each case the power-giving element, the earth and the masses, is voiceless, massive yet powerless to formulate will and action. Stalin’s characterization of CP authority and leadership is not based on a dialectical or historical relationship, but on affiliation. As the son, the Party is subordinate to the masses, but the strength and ability of the masses is articulated in and as the son.

That Stalin used the narrative structure of mythology is key to his point here. The hero, or party, translates the power of the gods – or the people – into knowledge and action. The source of power, figured as the earth, the mother, the people, is *in itself* unable to speak and act for itself, without the son.

***

“The Ruling Claws” was a popular cartoon in the *Daily Clarion*. Its meat-and-drink was the bourgeois home, in which the capitalist’s wife is an enormously bosomed figure who dwarfs her husband. In tiara and evening dress, this wife illustrates the grotesque imbalance capitalism creates in the family. The cartoon characteristically depicted bourgeois family relations as business-like affairs, openly acknowledged as such by husband and wife alike. In the Popular Front era, such a cartoon implicitly made a family-based case for socialism: in contrast to such hard-boiled, bloated plutocrats, working-class and middle-class Canadians could find in their own family lives models of caring and companionship. Indeed, the CPC appropriated the middle-class model of the reproductive family as the essence of its own notions of propriety, public order and virtue, contrasted vividly with the decadence, corruption and deceit of the dominant class. In this sense, the Party continued the tradition of deploying ‘woman’ as symbolic currency in broader arguments about social order. In contrast to the fatally divided and unwholesome
bourgeois family, the working-class family was a microcosm of the healthy community and genuine social power. References to the family and nation enabled the CPC to present its politics as universal rather than class-based. The foregrounding of gender and sexual difference was the leading edge of this effort.

In the Third Period the CPC’s depictions of family had emphasized the stark differences between bourgeois and working-class families. With the Popular Front Against Fascism, the working-class family was no longer the antithesis of the bourgeois family, but simply a much better version of it. It represented the evolution of the heterosexual family into a more fully egalitarian institution. The case against capitalism was made in terms defined by love and comradeship: couples struggling to respect and support one another in the face of unemployment, young adults unable to marry because they could not afford children, young girls who “wise up” to the boss’s advances and get involved with the union, young men leaving their families in pursuit of work. While this critical narrative thread remained throughout the decade, with the Popular Front it was joined by positive depictions of the working-class family as exemplar of health and order. Fiction and journalism in the CP press paralleled the insecure, unhappy and alienated women and men in middle-class houses with the emotionally stable and socially integrated mother and father in working-class homes.\(^{260}\) Such middle-class people were not, in the CPC imagination, the bloated plutocrats of the “Ruling Claws,” but rather potential members of the new order. They were offered an escape from their lives of tedium to ones of purpose, companionship and fulfilment. In embracing such family values, women would be building the revolution. A historicist and holistic position once maintained within the Party by the likes of Custance, one that trained a classical Marxist historicist eye on “the family” and believed housewives to bear some considerable potential as agents of a new day, had been set aside. Now, in the interests of building

\(^{260}\) For instance, see Mary Quayle Innis, “Staver,” *New Frontier* 1, 1 (April 1936).
the nation and saving the Soviet Union, the CPC declared itself to be a militant partisan of universal and dehistoricized middle-class “family values.”
Chapter Three

The CPC and ‘the Woman Question’:

Gender in Class Politics

Women and “the Woman Question” were not a priority for the Communist Party of Canada (CPC) in the first half of the 1930s. The predominantly male membership considered the work women did in and for the family to be an uncomplicated expression of their sexual and reproductive role.\(^261\) Analysis and organizing on the woman question was uneven and sporadic in this decade of CPC history. The women who did become active members embraced the CPC’s class politics. Yet for some members the connection between socialism and sexual equality was essential. Their commitment was to a movement geared to transforming the organization and meaning of work itself, in both its broad and precise senses.

Part of my argument here -- one that will be taken further in later chapters focused on individuals -- is that the sense of work as self-becoming was an important part of many members’ investment in the Communist movement. This was especially the case for several middle-class women who played a formative role as cultural producers and organizers in the Communist movement in Canada in the 1930s. Subsequent chapters will focus on two of these women, each of whom (more or less consciously) challenged the limitations she faced as a middle-class woman within a Communist Party. For them, membership offered a way to break away from dominant models of womanhood and to expand their own horizons.

The issue of women’s status was not central in a movement devoted to establishing labour as the basis of social value. Yet the question of who and what

\(^{261}\) This was before the publication in 1940 of Mary Inman’s controversial work, *In Woman’s Defense*. Inman was a member of the California section of the CPUSA, and the work was a publication of the Party’s Committee to Organize the Advancement of Women. The book, and all of Inman’s innovative writing on ‘the woman question,’ was quickly repudiated by the CPUSA.
women were and how their work as labourers, wives and mothers counted — politically, economically and culturally — remained an important and intractable issue for the CPC in the 1930s. While women generally and wives in particular were sometimes discounted as unreliable members, dominant structures of gender and kinship were key to legitimating the hierarchical structure of the Communist Party. Throughout the shifts in CPC policy this dissertation traces, the working-class mother and family – both of them under-analyzed and over-sentimentalized – became key to the case for Communism in Canada.

From the mid-1930s, the CPC sought to unite the working and middle classes in the Popular Front Against Fascism. In this context, references to women and family in Party discourse helped to bridge differences between the working and middle classes and to bring these worlds together in defence of a broadly conceived “progressivism.” From 1935 until the beginning of the Second World War, the Party claimed a common ground linking the middle class and the institutions of the modern democratic state. The politics of the Popular Front in Canada were based on, and supported by, conventional (and distinctly non-revolutionary) notions of gender. The CP appropriated the socio-sexual logic of capitalist culture in order to undermine the identification of Communism as the opposite and inversion of capitalism, to turn this logic against capitalism, and to identify Communism with democracy and progressivism.

In contrast to maternal feminists’ sex-based vision of women’s political agency, Canadian socialists in the early twentieth century saw women’s equality as part of the project for improving social organization through scientific principles and planning. The Great War and the economic crisis of 1929 bolstered the case for a planned society and illuminated the devastating effects of uncontrolled market forces on social development. Against suffragists’ argument for common cause among
women, communists and socialists saw the ‘woman question’ as one that would be resolved only through a workers’ revolution.

In the pre-1935 CPC press, women (and youth) were portrayed as supporters or saboteurs (although often unwitting) of working-class struggle and solidarity. Their importance consisted not primarily in their position as adjunct members of the working class, but in their potential to undercut or sabotage working-class unity. Hence the importance that women (like youth) be taught to understand and appreciate working-class unity. Women and youth were believed to be particularly susceptible to the blandishments of the master class. This not only explained the difficulty of convincing women (and youth) to become members in their own right, it justified the limited scope of work among women that the Party undertook between 1924 and 1929. In the Popular Front Against Fascism the Party would reverse this order, making women’s roles at home the basis of their importance in the movement.

For CPC organizers and strategists in the Third Period, class-based organization was fundamental and pre-eminent over all other categories of social identification such as gender or ethnicity. Communists did not ignore gender. They used it indirectly, rather than emphasizing the significance of sexual difference, as maternal feminists did. Communists attached the merits of working-class masculinity to the working class as a whole. Strength, perseverance, loyalty, honour, autonomy and will were the qualities of a united working class. Strength and fortitude distinguished working-class women; it was their possession of these masculine qualities that distinguished working-class women from their feminized counterparts in the middle and upper classes.

This chapter on women and gender in the CPC details the shift away from this masculine portrayal of the working class as a whole, beginning in 1934-1935, and the incorporation of sexual difference as a constituent element in Communist politics. After 1935, ‘womanhood’ in and for the CPC became a larger, looser rubric
under which universal qualities of a gendered progressivism became the basis for mobilizing women in support of the united front against fascism. This shift was closely related to the Soviet project of building socialism in one country, a development that has been seen by many critics as the CPSU’s abandonment of its revolutionary program. The emphasis here is not on developments within the CPSU or the Soviet Union. My concern is not with the formal political impact of CP policy shifts or the relative dependence or autonomy of the Canadian communist movement. Rather, I focus on the ideological effect of the Soviet Union and the CPSU on communist politics in Canada, and specifically on the development of the cultural wing of the movement.

The CPC’s efforts to organize women were sporadic throughout the 1930s. Since its formation in 1921, the CPC had routinely denounced sex-based inequality and regularly criticized unsafe working conditions and inadequate wages for women workers. Yet the Party also often fell back on conventional notions of gender, such as women’s association with peace and nurturing, their place in the home, and their supposed natural affinity for reproductive labour. In such ways it was the categorical ‘woman,’ rather than flesh-and-blood women members, that was most important to the CPC. In a movement built on the ontological and social significance of labour, working-class women were defined by their sex; they were woman workers or the wives and mothers of the working class.

Since the 1870s “the woman question” had occupied socialists of all stripes, and the communist response in particular contained much that was feminist. In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Engels explained that the

---


263 On ‘the woman question’ see McKay, *Reasoning Otherwise*, Chapter Five, and Kate Weigand, *Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women’s Liberation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), Chapter One. Note this example of one of the more radical moments in the CPC press on the woman question, “…though Mom and Dad got that wedding ring for a great and happy occasion, the thoughts it brings to mind, of branded cattle, of slaves with chains about their necks, and of women not yet free, are far from happy ones.” “Why Do women Wear Wedding Rings?” *Daily Clarion*, 1 May 1936, 10.
historical division of labour within the family and primitive community led to the formation of property and thus to the formation of social classes with distinct roles and relations to property. Engels identified the origin of sex-based inequality not in sexual difference but in women’s position in the family, their alienation from the social relations of property.\textsuperscript{264} When private property is abolished, sexual difference would cease to be a basis for inequality. Sexual difference itself is treated in the writings of Marx and Engels as unproblematic and fundamental. Private property had created the conditions for the “world historical defeat of the female sex”\textsuperscript{265} and it was only through socialism and communism that the conditions for sexual equality would be established. The Marxist critique of bourgeois feminism pointed out that the equality and social agency of privileged women did not extend to working-class women. While the New Woman pursued career and freedom, working-class women continued to work in factories and in low-paid positions where they cared, cooked, and cleaned for families other than their own.\textsuperscript{266}

For CPC leaders the Party was the vehicle through which the working class would fulfill its revolutionary destiny. The role of the Party was not to ‘represent’ workers, as workers’ understanding of their needs and interests was muddied by social democratic ideology, religious pietism and political utopianism. The role of the Party was to lead workers. The Party itself represented the interests of the working class (which the Party identified more clearly and pursued more effectively than an unorganized working class possibly could). Some sectors of the working class were more backward than others, and in particular, women required the Party’s

\textsuperscript{264} Engels’s well-known summary is: “The first class opposition that appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman in monogamous marriage, and the first class oppression coincides with that of the female sex by the male. Monogamous marriage was a great historical step forward; nevertheless, together with slavery and private wealth, it opens the period in which every step forward is also relatively a step backward, in which prosperity and development for some is won through the misery and frustration of others.” Frederick Engels, \textit{The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State} (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 129.

\textsuperscript{265} Ibid., 120.

\textsuperscript{266} The combination of sexual and social roles that is central to bourgeois womanhood is thus understood as an aspect, or continuation, of class domination.
tutelage and guidance in order to come to know their own interests as members of
the working class and understand the need for class conflict and revolution.

Soviet and CPC leaders considered sex-based organizing a divisive force in a
struggle in which unity was critical. The unity of the Canadian working class
movement, and support for the Soviet Union as example and inspiration, was
achieved in part through suppressing the question of sex-based inequality within the
CPC. Canadian leaders followed Lenin’s example in ridiculing sexual liberation as a
bourgeois preoccupation, a phenomenon of capitalist decadence which had no place
in class politics. Questions of equality and sexual liberation were given little
credence or weight.

In 1913 Alexandra Kollontai (at the time a member of the Russian Menshevik
Party but soon to become a prominent Bolshevik) described the prospects for
international feminism, for cooperation between women of different classes:

The paths pursued by women workers and bourgeois suffragettes
have long since separated. There is too great a difference between
the objectives that life has put before them...There are not and
cannot be any points of contact, conciliation or convergence
between them.  

While opposed to Kollontai’s views on sexual emancipation, Stalin shared her views
on the unbridgeable gulf between women of different classes. In a speech made on
International Women’s Day, 1925, he underscored the importance of women to the
Communist Party: “the first task of the proletariat and its advance detachment, the
Communist Party, is to engage in decisive struggle for the freeing of women workers
and peasants from the influence of the bourgeoisie, for political education and the
organisation of women workers and peasants beneath the banner of the proletariat.”
The “fate of the proletarian revolution, the victory or defeat of proletarian power
depends on whether or not the reserve of women will be for or against the working

class.” Stalin emphasized the importance of working women in combating the influence of the bourgeoisie: “International Women’s Day is a means of winning the women’s labour reserves to the side of the proletariat. Working women are not only reserves, however. They can and must become – if the working class carries out a correct policy – a real army of the working class, operating against the bourgeoisie.”

CPC members pointed to the lives of women in Soviet Russia to illustrate the superiority of communism. At every opportunity Party leaders, Canadian and Soviet alike, noted that in no bourgeois country were women as socially advanced or as equal to men under the law as they were in the Soviet Union. By demanding and supporting women’s social labour (through legal enfranchisement, education, and the provision of state-run child-care institutions) the socialist state had established the legal and material conditions necessary for sexual equality. Yet it was Lenin’s view that much remained to be done before women would be effectively equal, even in Russia. Lenin argued that abolishing the legal and economic structures that subordinated women was the necessary basis on which women would become equal in the Soviet Union, and so win their own emancipation. The early Soviet state had improved the lives of women in concrete ways, with the formation of the Zhenotdel (Women’s Bureau), training and education, literacy and leadership programs aimed at women, and the development of communal child care services such as daycare and natal education.

Soviet women’s social equality and legal enfranchisement was proof of the superiority of the Soviet state. Attitudes toward women among the CPSU leadership nonetheless remained cautiously conservative. The idea that women were not, at least not yet, equal to their responsibilities as citizens of the first socialist state was

---

reflected in the persistent view of women as requiring education in political and civic work, as politically backward and potentially dangerous to the workers’ state. Lenin argued that in order for women to understand the necessity for socialism, and in order for women to become fully emancipated, “we must have social economy, and the participation of women in general productive labour. Then women will occupy the same position as men.” Lenin denounced the drudgery of household labour and insisted that women must liberate themselves from endless private toil. Their liberation would be achieved by socializing housework, which he described as “the most unproductive, most barbarous and most arduous work that women perform. This labour is extremely petty and contains nothing that facilitates the development of women.” However, such a liberation of women from housework was the responsibility of women themselves (and not of their male fellow-Communists): “it is precisely the women who must undertake the building of these institutions.” In the 1919 speech quoted here, Lenin reminded his female audience: “the emancipation of the workers must be brought about by the workers themselves, and similarly, the emancipation of women workers must be brought about by the women workers themselves. Women workers should see to the development of such institutions [social welfare and child care facilities]; and their activities in this field will lead to a complete change from the position they formerly occupied in capitalist society.”

Women’s identification with reproductive labour remains intact here. Their liberation consists in socializing this work. The question of men’s part in reproductive work was momentarily raised in Clara Zetkin’s dialogue with Lenin, but not pursued extensively. Women’s work would be carried out more efficiently, yet

---

269 Communist Party of Great Britain, *Women and Communism. Selections from the Writings of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1950), 52, 53. The “precisely” in Lenin’s penultimate comment is interesting: Lenin does not really say *why* it was “precisely” up to women, and not men, to develop the institutions and systems for the transformation of this barbarous labour. He only offers the “explanation” that women and not men have had this responsibility in the past.
still by women — albeit women favoured with more resources, and acting in the service of the workers’ state, and not the bourgeois family.

Commentators from Leon Trotsky to Richard Stites have argued that as the Party in the Soviet Union became more bureaucratic, the cause of women’s social and sexual emancipation was increasingly sidelined.270 Lenin’s dismissal of the political significance of sex, in his discussions with Clara Zetkin, confirms that he downplayed the relation of sexual freedom to political equality.271 In contrast, Alexandra Kollontai argued for the centrality of sexual egalitarianism to political enfranchisement. By 1922, the year Stalin was named General Secretary of the CPSU, Kollontai was privately expressing her doubt that the revolutionary movement could survive the eclipse of its demand for a new morality.272 In her 1926 *Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Communist Woman*, Kollontai indicated that her acceptance of Bolshevik politics under Stalin was increasingly ambivalent. Her memoir registered her argument for the centrality of sexual freedom to political equality, despite the official marginalization of her views.

In 1929 Stalin disbanded the Zhenotdel (Women’s Bureau) and claimed that the Communist Party of the Soviet Union had raised Soviet women to the level of men.273 After 1929 the CPSU’s work among women was designed to enable Soviet women to become better citizens, better able to serve the industrial and agricultural needs of the Soviet Union. Where Lenin had pointed out the uniquely stultifying aspects of women’s lives, arising from their identification with the most mundane work of daily life, Stalin glorified women’s selflessness, modeling their relation to the

---

state on their maternal role in the family. Over the 1930s, earlier Soviet efforts to reform the family and establish sexual equality lost ground. At the same time, the project of building socialism in one country took precedence and determined the course of the international movement. From 1929, descriptions of Stalin as the authoritative, benevolent and all-knowing father figure became more (and more) frequent in the international Party press. Taking its cue from the CPSU, the CPC acknowledged the importance of women in winning the struggle for communism, yet most members avoided actually doing work among women.

As Stalin’s stature as Soviet leader grew, he reformulated Lenin’s theoretical legacy and recast Russian history as a narrative of heroic struggle against imperialist domination. Stalin described Russia metaphorically, as a mother requiring the superhuman efforts of her citizens/children to protect her against depravation by foreign imperialists. The portrayal of the Soviet state as socialist motherland requiring the protection of a vigilant proletariat drew on gendered metaphors of subordination and paternalism to reinforce the Party’s authority. Stalin was the father of Soviet socialism and shepherd of the international working class movement. Gender also helped to tie past and future together in a narrative whole, and helped citizens cope with the challenges of modernization and industrialization in the first workers’ state. The symbol of Mother Russia spoke to Russian nationalism, a glorious past which offered courage to workers in an insecure present. The idea of the Soviet Union as Socialist Fatherland was a powerful parallel to this image, evoking the possibilities that lay before the new Russian state.

***

The emphasis on industrial organizing meant that during the Third Period the CPC largely ignored the wives and mothers of the working class. Women
figured as politically significant in Communist politics insofar as they were workers, or acted on behalf of their husbands, fathers, or brothers. Women were visible to and in the CPC primarily through their affiliation to men. The party recognized and at times emphasized the differences between working-class men and women, but stressed their common interests and the need for unity against bourgeois domination. In contrast to the highly feminized women of the middle and upper classes, in the Third Period working-class women were portrayed as strong and practical, women whose fierce maternalism was an expression of their class identification. With the advent in 1935 of the Popular Front Against Fascism, the Party shifted its approach to women, in order to obscure class difference between working and middle classes. Central to this reorientation was a strategic endorsement of women’s identification with home and family. Women became the common ground between working- and middle-class interests and the Party endorsed a universal vision of ideal womanhood.

Sexual inequality received relatively little critical analysis in the CPC, and the leadership was unwilling to tackle sexism and inequality within or outside the Party in any sustained sense, even as this was routinely acknowledged and even as Party leaders exhorted members to pay serious attention to ‘the Woman Question.’ Instead, with the transition to the Popular Front, beginning in 1934, the Party embraced gender as the basis of women’s political position and agency. Mary Templin and Van Gosse argue that in 1934-1935 the CPUSA began to downplay the differences between women of the working and middle class, and to organize women on the basis of their gendered role in the family. The same change in strategy was occurring in the CPC. Van Gosse interprets this as a positive development, while this dissertation questions whether the CPC’s strategic embrace of maternalism was of benefit to women and, ultimately, the CPC itself. The burden of this shift in emphasis from working women to working-class womanhood was largely borne by
working-class women who were already active in the CPC, primarily Beckie Buhay, Bella Gauld and Annie Buller, but also by such middle-class members such as Margaret Fairley, Jean Watts and Dorothy Livesay. In a fundamental way the shift was not about or in response to women, whether working- or middle-class. Working-class women became symbolically important in CP discourse as representatives of a good femininity, the sort that socialism would make possible for all women.

In the Popular Front period, the CPC presented socialism as a progression from bourgeois democracy that would support strong family bonds and conventional gender roles. Yet with this claim the CPC relinquished a dialectical-historical analysis of sexual inequality and embraced a useful but ahistorical vision of masculine and feminine social roles. This revision was successful insofar as it helped broaden popular support for socialism during the Popular Front period. Yet the new recognition of sex role as the basis of women’s political and social agency brought with it the notion of labour as essentially gendered, a reflection of social role and position, rather than the locus of self-materialization and social transformation.

As we have seen in Chapter Two, much important Communist work among women in the 1920s was undertaken by Florence Custance, who made the Women’s Labour Leagues an important organizing force, one that waned after the demise of

---

274 It also meant that the CPC severed its theoretical affiliation to Rosa Luxemburg’s writings on organizing working-class women. Luxemburg had distinguished between bourgeois and working-class women not on the basis of gender, but on the basis of the ontological impact of working-class women’s involvement in social labour on production. In her 1912 speech “Women’s Suffrage and Class Struggle,” Luxemburg distinguished between what working-class and bourgeois women would do with the vote. “Most of those bourgeois women who act like lionesses in the struggle against ‘male prerogatives’ would trot like docile lambs in the camp of conservative and clerical reaction if they had suffrage. Indeed, they would certainly be a good deal more reactionary than the male part of their class. Aside from the few who have jobs or professions, the women of the bourgeoisie do not take part in social production. They are nothing but co-consumers of the surplus value their men extort from the proletariat. They are parasites of the parasites of the social body. And consumers are usually even more rabid and cruel in defending their ‘right’ to a parasite’s life than the direct agents of class rule and exploitation.” From the Rosa Luxemburg Internet Archive, http://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1912/05/12.htm (accessed 9 March 2010).

275 Van Gosse makes the point that the CP became more aware of and receptive to women’s gendered interests in the 1930’s. In and from this sexed position women gained political agency, but this was constrained by its functioning within a political and ideological framework whose strengths (as well as its weaknesses) relied on a strange combination of socialism and patriarchy.
their architect in 1929. In the Third Period, Beckie Buhay, the director of the CPC’s re-organized and re-named Women’s Department, set about reforming local WLL chapters along class revolutionary lines, which meant she actively discouraged WLL members from focusing on ethnicity and gender. The CPC’s already tenuous attention to women’s place and part in class struggle was further displaced when the WLL was absorbed into the newly formed Workers’ Unity League (WUL).

Conceived as the centre of revolutionary trade union activity in Canada, the WUL became the umbrella organization for the CPC’s organizing work. In his survey of Canadian Communism, Norman Penner described the scope imagined for the WUL at the CPC plenum early in 1931: “the WUL was to take over sole responsibility for the National Unemployed Workers’ Association, to set up and guide a workers’ defence corps to protect demonstrations and picket lines, and to direct the women’s labour leagues, women’s auxiliaries in the unions, youth sections in the unions, and the Workers’ Sports Association.” This was not about blurring the distinction between ‘reproductive’ (non-waged) labour and ‘productive’ (waged) labour. Rather, the objective was to marshal mass organizations, of all types, in the struggle against capitalism and to bring all mass organizations into line with the centralized CPC organization. The absorption of the WLLs into the WUL made the Women’s Labour Leagues into a mouthpiece of party policy, instead of a venue for women’s political activism.

In 1929 the balance of power in the CPC belonged to a younger group of party leaders, less experienced as political activists and organizers. Stewart Smith, Tim Buck, Beckie Buhay, had each been shaped by CI doctrine and sustained by CP discipline, increasingly in the hands of Stalin and his supporters. In the transfer of power away from the initial and largely self-educated first generation leadership of the Canadian communist movement, the reactionary implications and effects of a

276 Norman Penner, Canadian Communism: the Stalin Years and Beyond (Toronto: Methuen, 1988), 104.
shift in ideological emphasis from revolutionary womanhood to “militant mothering” were not noticed. Yet if Custance’s ghost had been surveying events in the early 1930s, she would have concluded that the revolutionary promise the CPC had initially made to women remained unfulfilled. Within the CPC, despite repeated exhortations to improve its work among women and to draw them into the class struggle, women remained primarily defined by, and identified with, their role in the family. While Custance had recognized that women responded to this identification, it was for her the starting point, from which women’s politicization could proceed. In the Popular Front, this identification became the basis of women’s political engagement and agency.

The WLLs were intended to be a place where women’s gender-based concerns could be aired and commonly addressed. The acknowledgment that sexual difference created a distinct set of interests for women, which stemmed from their role within their families, was eventually recognized as Custance’s contribution to Canadian class politics. Yet in 1929 the effort to integrate working-class women into class struggle through acknowledging the implications of sexual difference was not merely abandoned, but actively repudiated by the CEC of the national party, in accordance with the CI-authored concept of a third and final period of class-against-class struggle.

***

Commentary in CPC journals and newspapers, especially in the letters columns, indicates that within the Party, members were (at least occasionally) critical of sexism. Why did little of this popular debate emerge in CPC discourse? Convention reports and speeches also indicate that the Party did try (again, at least
occasionally) to recruit and promote women into leadership positions. Rank and file women generally preferred working with other women in such bodies as auxiliaries, to working with men in what were, sometimes, unfamiliar circumstances. Yet they also joined picket lines and eviction protests, and took part in marches and demonstrations. The CPC encouraged women to join in working-class struggle and assured them that socialism would support women as mothers and workers. Yet in CPC organizing and action, conventional gender roles remained resistant to even minor revisioning and it was their role as mothers that continued to define women within the Party. In the Third Period, sex-based inequality was not ignored by the Party, but treated as a secondary aspect of class inequality. This meant there was little interest within the CPC for criticism of its leadership on ‘the woman question.’ When complaint or criticism was made, the response was standard: members must work harder to educate and involve women in class politics. The woman question remained an intractable issue for the CPC throughout the 1930s because its own working-class politics was shaped by the logic of sex-based difference, by the characterization of ‘feminine’ interest and attachment as reactionary and ‘masculine’ assertion and domination as progressive.

Over the 1930s the portrayal of women in the CPC press fluctuated in response to factors not immediately linked to class struggle in Canada, i.e. the national security of the Soviet state and the evolving diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and its neighbours in Europe. The Soviet Union was the beacon of hope for the international socialist movement, and its political, industrial, economic and security needs affected the dynamic of Communist politics in Canada. The

---


278 *The Globe*, one of Toronto’s most prestigious dailies, reported on the reception Hunger Marchers received in Toronto in July 1934. Notable in its coverage was the attention paid to the women marchers by the “crowd of several thousand curiosity hunters in Queen’s Park” watching them. The report estimated that 5,000 spectators watched a parade of 500 protesters march around Queen’s Park Crescent, “among which the woman-folk mopped perspiring brows with handkerchiefs and chanted: ‘We want cash relief,’ or ‘We want bread, not beer.’”
portrayal of women in relation to class struggle and the Communist movement reflected and facilitated changes in Soviet and CI policies. In this ideological work, women and ‘woman’ performed multiple and sometimes contradictory duties. After 1935 both became even more apparent, as women and ‘woman’ became increasingly important elements in CPC discourse.

Alongside photographs of Canadian women in factories and fields, and Soviet women on tractors or parachuting from airplanes, the CPC press began carrying photographs of Hollywood starlets and radio personalities. Initially, coverage of Hollywood stars was predominantly critical: the talent of big stars was downplayed and the reactionary politics driving the big-money movie industry condemned. The inclusion of coverage on Hollywood and the new mass entertainment in the Daily Clarion was in part driven by practical considerations. The new daily required more copy than could be supplied by its own writers. But it was also political, as Hollywood movies and star personalities were quickly capturing the hearts, minds, and money of Canadian workers. The Daily Clarion made itself relevant to its readers by offering them insight and commentary on a relatively new topic that keenly interested them. Coverage gave readers an inside view of Hollywood as part of the class struggle -- one that could be discerned not only in the type of commodities it sent into circulation, but also in the way it produced them. At the end of February 1936 the Worker showed a collage of female stars in the Broadway musical, The Ziegfield Follies of 1936, and asked “What Price Glory?” The writer attributed the “ballyhoo” over the show to the uncritical press it received in “arch-fascist” William Randolph Hearst's papers, and implied that a “particular friendship” between Hearst and one of the cast members was the reason for the rave reviews. The writer challenged the appeal of sexed-up glamour and fame, and pointedly asked, “what does that mean to the girls working at eight dollars a week in some sweatshop?”

Over this critical year the coverage of Hollywood changed. The CPC journalists remained critical of the business. They became much more accommodating with respect to the commodities themselves. Entertainment -- sex appeal, dancing, singing, acting -- came in out of the cold. Fun could be an important element of political mobilization. The appearance of a comics page in the *Daily Clarion* on 1 May 1936 marked an important point of transition. Coverage of Hollywood and Broadway operated on two levels in the *Daily Clarion* (and also in more theoretical journals such as *New Frontier*). Reviews and editorials critiqued plot lines and the performances of particular actors. The news columns, on the other hand, basked in Hollywood glamour news. Publicity photos of female stars were accompanied by short, often enthusiastic accounts of their talent and charm. By early January 1937 the uncritical tone of much of the newspaper can be discerned in a description attached to a collage illustrating the young women in Hollywood: “Elbowing their lovely way into the realm occupied by the great stars of Hollywood, these little starlets are already beginning to threaten the supremacy of established screen celebrities.” It is not sex these starlets (all female) were selling, but talent. Strange as it may seem, the CPC was promulgating a very optimistic portrait of Hollywood, depicted not as the epitome of capitalist culture and the perils of out-of-control individualism, but as a place where talent mattered and up-and-comers could still make their mark.

***

The Popular Front turn to Hollywood corresponded with an overall reconceptualization of the place of women within the Communist movement. With their incorporation into the Workers’ Unity League in 1931, the Women’s Labour

280 “Remember These Faces …” *Daily Clarion*, 10 January 1937.
Leagues became, under Beckie Buhay’s stern directorship, little more than auxiliaries to the CPC. The WLL remained important to working-class women, but no longer as a means of engaging and training women in political organization and activism on their own behalf. While it was important to “mobilize working class housewives upon immediate questions that effect [sic] the women of the working class in the home,” it was most important that “[t]hese struggles must be linked up with the struggles of their men folk and with the wider national and international questions.”281 Announcements and resolutions from the WLL became a show of women’s support for working-class militancy and the leadership of the Soviet Union. Many of the younger party leaders, including Beckie Buhay, viewed Canadian housewives as unwilling and incapable of leadership and self-representation. Under the control of the WUL, the WLL organized women’s work in support of their families, their class, and their Party.

Wives and mothers in the CPC were seen as offering emotional ballast for the cause, but the class-conscious female worker was a comrade. Class loyalty ensured her commitment to working class politics, and all else -- including marriage and family -- came after. This emphasis began to change by 1933-34, as women portrayed in the Party press and addressed in speeches began to reflect more traditional forms of femininity and conventional ideas about womanhood. Working-class women were no longer portrayed as fundamentally unlike their middle-class counterparts. Traditional notions and norms of gender began to appear (alongside pictures of the non-traditional Soviet woman worker) in the Party press, challenged only by the occasional reader.282 Depictions of Soviet women and men in traditional gender roles offered evidence of the social and economic transformation of the Soviet Union, where the first Five Year Plan had been declared an unqualified success in 1932,

---

281 Ibid.
282 The critical reaction of some readers is discussed later in this chapter.
fulfilled a year ahead of schedule. This was in contrast to Canada, where unemployment and inadequate relief made family life hellish or simply impossible.

For all that the Third Period might be treated as an aberration, as is often the case in memoirs and the traditional historiography, and the Popular Front a return to sanity, it is interesting to note that with respect to gender politics, many Popular Front themes were first developed in the Third Period. During the Third Period, the CPC rejected feminist views on the significance of sexual difference and did not fully address the burdens working-class women faced in trying to fulfill their role in their families. The Party's policies before 1935 disadvantaged working-class women by ignoring the political impact of gender at work and in the family. Rather like in the Soviet Union, the “double burden” faced by women comrades -- household and family work combined with party duties -- was rarely officially noticed, because doing so would complicate the Third Period emphasis on class against class. In practice, ironically, this theoretical aporia worked to advantage middle-class women who were not compelled to carry the double burden. For (some) women in the CPC their ambition and scope of development was not defined or limited by gender. Middle-class women with intellectual and professional training and financial resources were in a very different position from working-class women within the Party. Class privilege and the political support provided by the Party combined to offer middle-class women a means to breach conventions of both class and gender -- a pattern first discernible in the Third Period. In a sense, such privileged women were forerunners of the Popular Front’s subsequent dehistoricization and depoliticization of universalized family values. In a Party that often did not “see” gender, they could serve as proof that strong women could flourish as leaders and spokespeople. During the Third Period class-based differences between middle- and working-class women were viewed as being more salient than the conditions they shared.
In contrast, during the Popular Front, class-based differences between both women and men were downplayed in a campaign to establish a common front of the progressive working and middle class against the reactionary political, cultural and social policies of fascism. The case for class unity was most evocatively and powerfully made through the portrayal of women, children and family as the symbol of what the Party – alongside all *progressive Canadians* – stood for. This claim depended on a notion of womanhood and the family as transcending class difference. The Party and supporters of the Popular Front against Fascism represented the future of progressive society, but with this strategic foregrounding of women’s identification with the home and reproductive labour, women in or aligned with the CPC were portrayed in the same terms as middle-class women.

CPC descriptions of women workers, unemployed single women, and working-class wives and mothers evoked, by contrast, a sense of what the Canadian working-class family might become under socialism. Women under capitalism were in a precarious position, dependent on husband or father, or pushed into work or, worse, unemployment. Women’s greater exploitation as worker was pointed out and denounced repeatedly in the CPC press. Yet the moral outrage conveyed in press stories about women was seemingly provoked less by the denial of equal pay or safe working conditions to women workers, and more by examples of women’s sexual vulnerability, illustrated in the extreme by the danger of rape and the prospect of prostitution. The low status of working-class women in Canada – as workers and as wives – figured more as one more proof of capitalist inhumanity than as a concrete issue calling out for proletarian women to rise up and change things. In speeches and plenum reports the CPC continued to demand equal pay for women workers, as well as higher allowances and better support for infant and child care. But these important elements of the Communist platform lacked the emotional impact of

---

283 See for instance, “Girls get 3 cents an hour as bosses take $25,000 a year,” *The Worker*, 17 November 1934.
Clarion stories about mothers killing their children, girls making pennies while their fat cat bosses spent millions, and so on.

With the assertion of common ground between working- and middle-class womanhood in the early Popular Front, the Party’s work among women and its analysis of women’s situation was transformed. Those objects of Third Period derision, middle-class wives and mothers, became subjects of legitimate political interest in the Popular Front. No longer stigmatized as a higher and more respectable form of parasitism, their work was seen in a more generous light. This was a move away from the Party’s emphasis on waged labourers as the most important element of the working class. Granted, images of wives and mothers did not entirely crowd out women workers in the Communist press. Yet they were part of a complicated, often inconsistent, Popular Front approach to women and the ‘Woman Question,’ one which often called readers’ attentions to the achievements of women in socialist, and even social democratic, countries, and even struggled to address the women who worked in the home.

The case for drawing women into antifascist struggle was made at the 1935 CI conference by Kirsanova, representative of the ECCI’s International Women’s Secretariat, and reported in the Worker: “The capitalists, she said, are extending their use of women’s labor with the object of unlimited exploitation.” The explanation of women’s particular interest in opposing war and fascism was that “[w]omen’s labor plays an extremely important role, particularly in the great war industries which from the first moment of war will use women’s labor almost exclusively.” This reiterated the 1929 emphasis on women’s role as workers as their point of entry or intersection with the Party, the point at which women mattered in and to the CP, as opposed to their roles as wives and mothers. This argument for women’s involvement in the anti-war and antifascism movement was addressed to women as workers. But the

---

284 “Must Draw Women into Resistance,” The Worker, 22 August 1935.
The crux of the argument was that a desperate capitalism (i.e. fascism) would turn even women into workers, and deprecate the value of labour even further in doing so. The objective of drawing women into resistance against fascism was to keep them from being turned, by capitalism, into super-exploited workers while their men died in war. Yet the inconsistencies of the Party’s appeals to women were irrelevant to the objective of building the strongest possible Popular Front Against Fascism. From 1935 the Party built the Popular Front by compounding such inconsistencies between its analytical framework and its political strategies.285

A new women’s column, “With Our Women, was introduced in *The Worker* in July 1935. Editorials frequently addressed the status of women in Germany, and linked Hitler’s pro-natalist policies to the reactionary logic of fascism. By this logic German women were being limited to work as domestic drudge and mindless mother of the Aryan nation, while antifascist women who protested against Nazi policies were treated with fascist equality: imprisonment and execution. In contrast, Soviet women were revered as mothers, but encouraged and educated in public work. Smith quotes from a speech made by Lenin’s widow, Krupskaya, to highlight the differences for women between fascism and socialism: “The mother instinct is noble, and we consider it a great force, but we do not want women to devote their lives to rearing children only. We do not want this or any other aspect of their married lives to separate them from public work.” Smith adds that “[h]ere alone, in this workers’ and farmers’ state, is there real freedom and equality for women.”286

Women’s equality in the Soviet Union illustrated the superiority of socialism to capitalism and fascism. Unlike the American suffrage movement, Soviet women had not struggled long to win their equality. Recognized as both just and necessary to ensure that

---

285 But this was a slow process, starting from the January 1935 articles in the *Worker* by Lawson *et al.* which adhered to a pretty orthodox reading of class politics and, while beginning to backpedal on opposition to the CCF, portrayed government and liberal democratic policies, such as Roosevelt’s in the US, as a thinly-disguised fascism directed against communists and workers.

women became fully productive members of Soviet society, women’s equality was a creation of the Soviet state, decreed by Soviet law.

The 1937 convention of the CPC was an opportunity to broadcast and reinforce the new attitude toward organizing women. The pre-convention publication *Discussion* carried no less than six articles on women and the Party’s work among women. Annie Buller, the prominent CPC organizer and editor of *Discussion*, described the situation in the Party and challenged members (once again) to take work among women seriously. She pointed out the Party’s failure to promote women members as leaders, and argued that the failure to recognize women’s organizational skills and leadership potential meant that the Party lagged behind women rather than leading them. Buller incorporated the themes of Dimitrov’s canonical Seventh Congress speech of 1935 into her article, and used examples drawn from the work of non-party Canadian women: “On the unemployed field, we can say without hesitation, that the wives of the unemployed have been in the forefront of the struggle against relief cuts and, in many cases, for increased relief grants, for clothing, kitchen utensils, etc. These women have shown courage, devotion, self-sacrifice and remarkable creative ability.” Most of these women were not CPC members. Yet even without the Party’s leadership they understood the need to support labour unity in defence of Canadian workers’ interests:

> Among the wives of the unemployed there is unity. C.C.F., Communist and non-party women were united in the struggle for bread. Party leadership was wholeheartedly accepted. The correctness of our Party line brought victory in tens of instances. Why is it then that we have not recruited hundreds of women into our Party, that we have not promoted dozens of women in the Party to leading positions? Why is it that proletarian women that are tested in the struggle and rise to great heights do not find their way

---

287 This attitude was apparent in the Party press. *The Worker* had introduced a women’s column in July of 1935. It continued running when the paper became a daily and was renamed the *Daily Clarion*. Coverage combined news and tips of interest to women and political analyses particularly relevant to women, children and family. Throughout 1935 there was substantial coverage of the issue of birth control. A Toronto clinic was on trial for disseminating information on birth control, and the new Soviet constitution had just instituted a law against abortion. See “With Our Women,” *The Daily Clarion*, 3 October 1936, 5.
in to the Party — the Party that they respect and look to as their leader?288

The problem, Buller concluded, was with the Party. This point had already been made by Dimitrov in his 1935 speech: “There cannot be a successful fight against fascism and war unless broad masses of women are drawn into it and agitation alone will not accomplish this...”289 Following Dimitrov, Buller now insisted that the Party’s work among women was central to the united front. The Party had to enlist their support by learning from women’s methods of organizing and by attending to working-class women’s practical, prosaic, and immediate needs.

The Eighth Convention of the CPC was an opportunity to affirm the re-orientation of the Party’s leadership role, especially its new emphasis on responding to workers’ needs and interests. In another article in the pre-convention paper Discussion, Kate Fountain called for a reprise of the approach Custance had taken ten years earlier, and denounced sexist prejudice among members, male and female. These members did not value work among women because they disdained women’s work. The headline read, “The Labor Movement Needs Organization Talents Women Show in Home Management.” After dutifully quoting Lenin’s descriptions of the backward state of women’s political consciousness, Fountain argued that members must not ignore the lack of political consciousness of thousands of women, nor overlook the hundred and one issues in which women are interested in a personal way and will discuss with one another. We must not scorn to organize sewing circles, bridge clubs, etc. Thousands of Canadian women meet together in such groups and we have to utilize the opportunity, joining in the activities common to them and with patience set about raising the level of the sewing circle to a lively discussion group around topics of the day, particularly around those concerned with the immediate locality. Our male comrades must be willing to go to speak to such groups of women, helping them to initiate action, and come to a fuller realization of themselves as vital members of society and of the working class, with immense power in their hands to improve the lot of women, married and single, employed and unemployed.

289 Ibid.
Rather than ignoring or disdaining women’s work, “[n]o effort must be spared to utilize the leadership and organizational ability developed in running a home for participation in the working class movement.” Only a few years before, such a philosophy of outreach to housewives, including even such details as card parties organized for housewives, was one item in the long bill of indictment against Custance. Now it was being recommended as an important step to revaluing women’s organizational skills.

***

One of the most significant forces changing CPC representations of women in the mid-1930s, especially in *The Worker* and the *Daily Clarion*, was the antifascist and antiwar movement. There was (not surprisingly) a women’s section of the Canadian League Against War and Fascism. At the end of January 1935, this group (acting in conjunction with the decidedly middle-class and social-democratic Women’s International League of Peace and Freedom) organized a speaking tour for one Mrs. Celentin Barr. Mrs. Barr was a prominent member of the American branch of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom and of the American League Against War and Fascism. What was notable in the news story that appeared in *The Worker* advertising her tour was its favourable reference to her suffragist background. No ‘Third Period’ denunciations of bourgeois feminism were in evidence -- only respectful references to Mrs. Barr’s distinguished career as “an old-time suffragette, being the grand-daughter of Margaret Nash, one of the first women


291 John Manley makes the point that most middle-class involvement with the CPC occurred under the auspices of the Canadian League Against War and Fascism. See Manley, “Audacity, Audacity,” 23–4.
to attend the Women’s Rights meeting in the U.S.A. in 1848 at Seneca Fall, N.Y. and ... a member of the National Women’s Party, lobbying in Washington for them on the Equal Rights Movement.”

The eighth CPC convention in October 1937 brought the CPC fully into line with the CI’s emphasis on building the Popular Front Against Fascism. Contributors to Discussion endorsed listening to women as the first step in drawing them into political struggle. Granted, Communists were still expected to set the tone and master the agenda of that struggle -- such new recruits were expected to endorse the goals and methods of the CPC. Communists were, as in the days of Custance, encouraged to listen in order then to lead. Nonetheless, the tone of “reaching out” to women was a departure for the Party. It pervaded almost every contribution on work among women in the 1937 pre-convention Discussion. Women’s housekeeping skills were reconfigured as valuable skills in the political as well as domestic realm. Women were portrayed as a resource the CPC leadership had neglected. (Of course, they still required the CPC to give them a political education). As housewives and farmers’ wives, women possessed talents valuable to the CPC. In order for their political power to be unleashed, argued one H. Mathieson of Vancouver,

a system of elementary education must be carried on: firstly in relation to woman’s own position in society and what part she can play to help remedy these ills, gradually leading up to the complex system of capitalism under which she lives, and imbuing in her a pride in the great World Communist Party and what our Party stands for. If this basis is provided we will be able to interest her further in political life, an understanding of the trade union movement and the great part that she, a woman, can play in the struggle for the birth of a new Socialist system of society. By this method we can eliminate for ever this unhealthy, inferiority complex which so many of our women possess.

292 “Anti-War Bodies to Tour Mrs. Barr,” The Worker, 26 January 1935, 4.
293 The more critical point, sometimes made by Annie Buller -- that the leadership had overlooked women who wanted to become militants -- was generally sidelined.
Mathieson places the responsibility for women’s political marginalization on women themselves; their grasp of Communism and what the Party stands for, their understanding of the trade union movement was presumed to be incomplete. Even after overcoming these weaknesses, Mathieson implies that women’s inclusion in the movement -- as “a woman” -- is on suffrage, dependent on Party sanction. A rural perspective on women’s place in the movement was supplied by Florence Theodore in Regina, a prominent middle-aged CPC organizer. In contrast to Mathieson, she pointed out that as producers and marketers of dairy and poultry commodities, farm women possessed a keen sense of the economic issues at the centre of political struggle. Women’s welfare, community circles, and homemakers’ clubs were venues in which the ‘progressive leadership’ skills of party cadres would be honed. Rather than criticizing rural women’s preference to meet “largely on a social and homecraft basis,” Party members should realize that the issues discussed by women at these meetings “are basic subjects and we should be sectarian indeed if we attempted to disturb their present form of organization.” The role of Party cadres in these situations was to listen to the women, to learn what was most important to them. Gentle encouragement and indirect guidance would transform “the spirit of quiet resignation” into a more militant “struggle for their economic needs.”

Theodore also mentioned the role of education in this process -- but not, significantly, women’s education out of backwardness but men’s education out of chauvinism. What was needed was “a campaign which will convince them that these women’s organizations are of great importance in the communities; that they are not just ‘pink tea’ organizations; that they do not function merely for the purpose of providing recreation for the women but that they meet a vital need of the women

---

295 Theodore would later become the first female head of a provincial division of the CPC, the Saskatchewan branch, 1942-1945.

and can become the instruments for improving the home and community life of the people, that they must encourage the building of these organizations and influence their wives to work in them.” This was a critical assertion of women’s role in political struggle, a role based on their place in family and community.

Theodore’s article merged women’s economic needs as housewives with their interest in peace and their role in “improving the home and community life of the people.”297 For all its important and productive broadening of the parameters of possible political agency, it still drew upon the conventional identification of women with the family. Even in this most interesting and welcome departure from Third Period rigidity, then, one found a subtle reliance upon the symbolic power of motherhood, rather than a more pointed articulation of the needs or interests of women. And this was typical of CPC discourse in the era of the Popular Front. Its earlier ‘revolutionary’ emphasis on women workers having failed to attract either many female members or much popular support, the CPC now turned to gestures of recognition with respect to motherhood. Mothers gave the CPC immediate and emotion-packed illustrations of the need to organize for peace and against fascism.

Before the Popular Front, Party work against war and imperialism foregrounded the class divisions between women, portraying working-class women’s opposition to war as rooted in a social structure in which working-class sons and husbands were little more than cannon fodder. In contrast, women’s interest in peace during the Popular Front was portrayed as springing from an abiding and classless maternalism, an instinct shared by all “healthy” (a euphemism for “progressive”) women. These changes in the portrayal of women and their relation to the peace issue mirrored the CP leadership’s recognition (at international and national levels) of the threat that fascism posed to the Party and especially the Soviet Union.

Indirectly but crucially, the Party’s association of Canadian women with its antiwar and antifascism campaigns helped to strengthen the case for the defence of the Soviet Union. Before 1935, the Party had given little more than rote recognition to women’s gendered interests, and had emphasized international working-class solidarity and defence of the Soviet Union over national identity and interests. With the need to unite against fascism, the Party’s orientation to both national identity and the family changed quite drastically and very effectively, in terms of expanding the CPC’s public support and popular influence. As well as obscuring the issue of class difference in Party politics, the deployment of a working-class version of universal womanhood in the Popular Front put the conventionally gendered family at the centre of party politics. Inverting the criticism that socialism would mean sexual anarchy, members argued that only a socialist Canada could ensure the future of a “healthy” – i.e., heteronormative, family-centred, stable – Canadian society.

Following the Seventh Comintern Congress the CPC rekindled styles of work and organization it had used before its 1929 convention and the Bolshevization campaign. It dropped the rhetoric of class war and worked to present itself as a party of the masses, rather than the leader of masses. In doing this, its focus expanded from workers and industrial organizing to “the people” of Canada, to the history of family and nation as a progressive people’s history. The shift away from strictly class-based analysis and action opened the door to a greater recognition of women and family as political forces. Once again, the CPC leadership lambasted itself for deficiencies in its work among women and tried to recruit more women into the Party and into leadership positions.

The status of women in the Party was one thing. The representation of women in the pages of party publications was often quite another. While the former reflected persistent sexism in the Party and the very real barriers to women’s involvement, the latter reflected the broad strategic imperatives of the CPC, CI and
CPSU. The centrality of wage labour in its analytical framework meant that the Party typically used, rather than challenged, women’s identification with the family. That women did work in the home, and that such work was both socially necessary and liable to exploitation, was an unaddressed issue. The Party’s organizing and agitational work relied on dichotomous divisions of labour into productive and reproductive, social and private — and the first terms in these polarities were privileged over the second. Notions of the public and the private that were more associated with liberalism than with Marxism were broadcast far and wide. Sex-based labour roles were naturalized, not critiqued. Such an unquestioning repetition of conventional ideas not only meant that an older socialist feminist questioning of the place of men and women was now largely forgotten, but also that Communists even failed to appreciate how mainstream notions of labour undermined the potential of working-class solidarity. They kept alive a narrow sex-based and masculinist conception of labour.

Stories featuring more explicitly masculine and feminine behaviours, both those considered appropriate and those marked as improper, began to appear more frequently in the pages of *The Worker* in 1935. When *The Woman Worker*, edited by Florence Custance, ceased publication in 1929, coverage of women workers and issues of interest to working-class women was incorporated into *The Worker*. News and stories focused on drawing working-class women into militant class struggle, and appealed to women to actively support class solidarity. Stories about women were most often about their exploitation in industry (“The Increasing Importance of Women in Capitalist Industry,” and “Woman Worker Refuses Bribe From Boss Court,” were typical headlines in this period). On 20 July 1935 a women’s column was reintroduced as a regular feature. “With Our Women” announced that its objective was

---

298 In 1936 *The Worker* became a daily paper and changed its name to *The Daily Clarion*.
299 *The Worker*, 14 March 1931, 7.
to bring to the working women and housewives of Canada a knowledge and understanding of the civilization in which we are living, and the role we play, not only as women but as members of that class of that part of the human family which toils and suffers and looks forward to a time when the present hardships, sufferings and indignities will be no more and when we all shall live in health, comfort, happiness, and security.

The column (initially conducted by “Martha,” first name only) explained that “the future of the working women and the future of the children we bear and rear is connected indissolubly with the future of the working class. It is only the final victory of the workers, the victory of Socialism, that will bring full equality and a fine, happy life to the women and all future generations.” Capitalism, with its need for cheap labour, had brought women out of the home and into factories, but only socialism would bring women equality and a better quality of life. The column addressed both women’s equality and the welfare of the family, and sought to capture women’s interest and respond to their most urgent needs. In keeping with this, the column most often addressed women in their role as mother and housekeeper. Martha pointed out that “[t]he home never will be held sacred by the ruling capitalist class to whom all people, men and women, are simply objects of exploitation.” The battle for a decent home life continued apace with the class struggle and would be won only with the victory of socialism. In the meantime, working-class women had a difficult but important job to do; if they did it well they would not only be helping the class struggle against capitalism, they would be improving themselves: “A well-ordered home makes those who live in it happy. The woman who systematizes and organizes her work can make time for cultural development, for work in her organization and by the same token proves her ability to think a given project through.” In being a good housewife, a woman was also training herself to

300 “With Our Women,” The Worker, 20 July 1935.
rationalize her labour, to be a good socialist.\footnote{301} This first column was representative of the best of what was to come: a blend of political education and consciousness raising with practical advice on cooking, cleaning, and keeping up a good appearance. In closing her first column, Martha offered a justification of its strategy. Her recipes and advice were not offered "because we want our readers to be satisfied with their lot, and make the best of it, but because we must have homes and food and properly cooked food is better than badly cooked food, a well-ordered home is better than a disorderly home, and cleanliness is essential to physical well-being."\footnote{302} Who could argue with such a commonsensical, down-to-earth approach to revolution?

The “With Our Women” column was soon taken over by Anne Smith, perhaps a pseudonym for everywoman (if she was indeed a real person, the name has ensured her obscurity.) Every Saturday the column delivered a trenchant weekly analysis of issues such as women’s role in working-class struggle, arguments on the importance of equal pay for women, the unemployed women’s struggle for relief, the wages of Canadian women workers, reports on women in the Soviet Union, and a few recipes. In its early days, the need for a women’s column was debated, with some endorsing the innovation, and others extremely critical of it. The women’s column grew into a women’s page, with more recipes and tips on how to spiff up one’s home and oneself on a relief budget, alongside columns addressed to children and youth. By 1937 the editorship had passed to Mrs. Alice Cooke, and the \textit{Daily Clarion} had added another twice-weekly column for women, “Woman’s World,” conducted by Julia Price. Each of these features brought labour politics to women’s attention, injecting accounts of the deplorable conditions under which fruit pickers worked into stories about the health benefits of citrus fruits. The treatment was certainly

\footnote{301} This last point is preceded by Martha’s attempt to head off criticism of the new column. Rather than justifying the innovation by saying it will make women’s lives less onerous and their drudgery less burdensome, ‘Martha’ relates women’s reproductive labour to the fate of capitalism: “Do not think that because in this column we are helping to advise and helping women to make the best out of what they have now, that we wish to extend the life of capitalism.” \textit{Ibid.}

inflected by class politics, but the topics – of home, family, peace – were similar to those offered to middle-class readers of mainstream publications such as *The Ladies Home Journal*.

Recognition of the importance of women’s role in the family was part of the CPC’s effort to downplay sectarian divisions on the Canadian left. Yet this greater appreciation of women in traditional roles did not (initially) displace its efforts to organize working and unemployed women. In the Soviet Union, women could do and be anything they chose, but they were also reported to be very stylish, very womanly, and very happy as wives and mothers. In the Soviet Union, women were needed as workers in industries, but they were just as necessary as childbearers. The CPC press depicted Soviet women as free to be both mothers and workers. Indeed, those fortunate women who did both were the most fulfilled. In contrast, Canadian women, underpaid and insecure as workers, overburdened and unprotected as mothers, were described as being torn between the world of work and family. Once they understood the reasons for this problem, they could grasp the need for socialism.

Contrary to the accounts put forward by some feminist historians, then, rather than being ignored by the CPC, women were, after 1935, often the centre of the Party’s attention. They were seen as offering excellent ways to rouse Popular Front sentiments and to both popularize and naturalize the Communist cause. Rather than strangers from distant lands with a terrifying ideology, Communists were little different in their gender ideals, sexual interests, or recreational pursuits. The woman=family equation became strategically essential for the party. With the Popular Front, the CP embraced traditional gender associations, and the vision of social order the Party offered to Canadians looked a lot like the prevailing bourgeois order: men defined by their work outside the home, and women defined by their work inside it. (Only on very rare occasions did the Communist press raise issues
about men in the household, except to use the pitiful house-bound existence of the unemployed or poverty-stricken man as another symbol of capitalism's uncaring irrationality – a favourite device of both reporters and fiction-writers). Moreover, when the Communists came to define their great goal, it was often in terms of sexual and familial metaphors familiar to all. This metaphorical regime of the Father applied locally and internationally. Locally, it encompassed the celebration of Tim Buck, now depicted as a regular family man with the normal preoccupations of any middle-class male Torontonian. Internationally, it entailed images of Stalin-the-Father, a sort of global husband and father, the truest and strongest protector of the working-class family and the working-class woman. The virtues of masculinity were attached to Stalin as leader, to Tim Buck his local representative, and to the working class as a whole, a sort of collective man. The Party’s embrace of the family provided an organic metaphor in which its own emphasis on centralized, paternalistic forms of organization were mirrored and legitimated. The Party put the language of family to work in an expanded socio-political framework, in which members were discouraged from exercising judgment or questioning decisions and directives from their superiors.

Beginning in June 1936 the Daily Clarion began to present stories on the new Soviet constitution, detailing the long process of its drafting and debate. An article on 20 June described the constitution’s sections. Women had already, in 1930, been declared “equal” by Stalin, and the 1936 constitution reflected this: “[w]omen enjoy equal rights in all spheres. The constitution guarantees to women the same rights as men, the same wages for the same work.” 303 While the constitution laid out the protection of Soviet citizens’ right to labour and leisure, it rescinded the implicit

legalization of sodomy in the first 1918 Soviet constitution, made abortion illegal except for medical reasons, made divorce more difficult, instituted regulations on child support, and placed limitations on the availability of contraception. These revisions to Soviet law reflected the state’s efforts to stabilize family life and boost the birthrate in the face of Soviet industrialization. As we have seen, the Canadian communist press painted the developments as further evidence of the superiority of Soviet life, testament to the Soviet veneration for women and family, in contrast to the poverty and insecurity of family life for the working class in Canada. Rather than limitations on the rights of Soviet women, these developments were heralded as evidence of the absolute security mothers possessed in the Soviet Union.

Yet in Canada the Party did support women’s right to access to birth control information and contraception devices. Even here, however, it pays to notice the subtleties. The Party did not base such arguments on demands for women’s sexual emancipation or empowerment. Rather, it drew attention to the insecurity of working-class families and the effect of poverty on children in capitalist society. The burdens pregnancy and motherhood placed on working-class Canadian women were such that they were entitled to contraception as a civil right. The welfare of working-class families depended on it. At the very time that the CPC was supporting the establishment of birth control clinics and access to free contraception in Canada, the CPSU was defending the Soviet Union’s limitation of birth control information and the withdrawal of abortion on demand under the new Soviet constitution. In both cases, the reproductive work and actual needs of flesh-and-blood women were “trumped” by overall arguments about the health of society as a whole.

It is important to keep in mind the difference and distance between Canada and the Soviet Union. The status of Soviet women was a key issue for Canadian Communists because this offered a clear illustration of the drastic improvement in

304 See Dan Healey, Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia, the Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).
social life that could be achieved in socialism. In a 1936 review of two recent
American publications on the Soviet Union, *Women in Soviet Russia* and *Factory,
Family, and Woman in the Soviet Union*, the prominent Canadian social worker and
writer Margaret Gould noted that the authors of each book had concluded that “the
Russian government today is putting into widespread practice the measures for
which women in other countries are pleading. Women in Soviet Russia have equality
of pay, equality of opportunity to qualify for and engage in any occupation they wish,
and equality in every other phase of life.” The equality of Soviet women was an
important but also controversial aspect of Soviet socialism. Soviet support of women
as mothers and of family welfare was an important counterbalance to this. Gould
quoted Lenin on the importance of women’s full participation in both formal
political and daily life, without which it “is idle even to speak of complete and stable
democracy.” She associated Soviet women’s empowerment with the welfare of
children and family, and made an important (though not entirely accurate) point that
appealed equally to socialist mothers and CPC members. Linking family welfare to
social welfare, Gould explained the logic animating Soviet socialism, and its relevance
for Canadian families: “Lack of economic security may make a poor type of mother.
If she is an inadequate mother, the children and family suffer. Ultimately the state is
the loser. Therefore they [the Russian government] hold that the mother in the
home is not different in her value as a worker, from the woman in the factory or
office or clinic.” Her claim was that the value of the work Soviet (and Canadian)
women carried out at home was as important as the work they performed in the
waged labour force. Gould’s argument was implicitly -- but only implicitly -- one that
connected the labour of women in the home with that of women in the waged
workplace.

January 1936, 5.
The Soviet family operated as a symbol of the nation’s progress, and at the same time as a stabilizing factor in a rapidly modernizing state. As Greta Bucher shows in “Struggling to Survive: Soviet Women in the Postwar Era,” responsibility for family welfare fell most heavily on women in the 1930s. Soviet women were encouraged to become mothers, and rewarded for having more children. They were also expected to continue in their jobs and to keep a good home. With the passage of the 1936 constitution, Soviet women’s family role became even more important as the state sought to increase the national birth rate. At the same time the family became an index of Soviet success. Family health and stability was proof that Soviet socialism was working.306

Between 1934 and 1936, the CPC’s emphasis shifted from the woman worker to women as wives and mothers. With this recognition of women in the broader context of working-class life, the locus of Communist politics changed, over the 1930s, from the factory to the streets and homes of an increasingly beleaguered working class. With the 1935 dissolution of the Workers’ Unity League the Party refocused its political and cultural work on the working-class family.307 Was its change of tactic in response to the effect of the economic crisis on family and sexual politics of the period? The crisis had certainly upset the gendered order of the working-class home, as working-class women became increasingly politically active in defence of their families.308 Women’s organization against inadequate relief was certainly ‘political’ in every sense. But it was what the family stood for that became most salient for the Party. The CPC did not suddenly discover the family as a site of political mobilization. Rather, it was led to the family through the turn to the

307 Even in the Third Period, the CPC had championed working-class families in anti-eviction campaigns and relief struggles. Such campaigns did not, however, entail a revaluation of the role and value of the housewife, nor a politics based on sexual difference.
Popular Front. During the Third Period, the Party had sought to show that working-class objectives, the achievement of a proletarian dictatorship, required the subordination of conjugal ties to the imperatives of class unity and struggle. Considerations of family welfare could threaten working-class unity. Family preoccupations were a weak link in a proletarian party on the brink of a revolutionary struggle for power. In the Popular Front, the CPC discovered the family afresh, this time not as a source of weakness, but as a pillar of strength and even as a model of its anticipated social order.

The Comintern obviously determined the broad policies the CPC followed -- from 1935 to 1941, it would not likely have challenged the Moscow Line on any substantive foreign policy issue, not even one as damaging to its own credibility (and legal status) as the Nazi-Soviet Pact. Nonetheless, how these policies were understood and implemented reflected the Canadian context and the attitudes of Canadian working men and women. It was not until the national convention in 1938 that the CPC leadership officially endorsed the Popular Front with social democrats -- yet, since 1932, CPC cadre had been closely involved in the day-to-day defence of workers, most dramatically in the fight against home evictions and for adequate relief.309

CPC members used metaphors of family, birth, childhood, growth, and maturity to describe the working-class movement; images of degeneracy, decline, and death were used to portray the outcome of a looming war: “Millions killed, crippled, mutilated; deathly plagues spread over wide areas by germ bombs (euphemistically called ‘bacteriological warfare’), populations of large towns and cities wiped out by aerial attacks; complete destruction of the cultural heritage of the ages; agonized humanity suddenly finding itself in the grip of barbarism; -- such is the prospect for

309 See “Neighbourhood Unemployed Branches,” The Worker, 12 December 1931, p. 3; “Can’t Feed Children, Mother Kills Self,” The Worker, 17 December 1932, 6; “Unemployed Council Fights Case of Woman Who Collapsed on Street,” The Worker, 11 March 1933, 4; Entire Family Split Up By Court Authorities Because Father is Workless,” The Worker, September 12, 1934, 3.
mankind if imperialism goes unchecked.” In 1936 it was workers who were defending decency and civility against capitalist barbarism. A *Daily Clarion* story depicted the pitched battle that ensued when family and friends tried to keep the police from evicting an elderly widow from her home in the east end of Toronto:

> Apparently showing more brutality to the women than the men, three policemen grabbed Mrs. Margaret Hambleton by the hair, as she was standing on the porch, and threw her down to the sidewalk where she lay writhing in pain . . . “Come on, attack again, attack again,” shouted a police officer, as he ordered his men to charge the staunch defenders of the beleaguered widow’s home. “For God’s sake be British and let the women alone,” some of the participants asked, but women were ruthlessly thrust aside and men thrown down to the ground below as police repeated the charge.  

The wages of capitalism were wasted youth, destruction, lost potential, war and a loss of civility. In contrast to this, socialism stood for peace, order and progress -- in the words of the noted participant -- for “Britishness.” By re-imagining the bourgeois ideal of the family in socialist form, an interdependent republic in which mother, father, and children were joined in mutual support, the Party placed the family at the centre of socialism. For working-class men and women in hard times, this vision of family in a better future offered necessary and tangible hope that there was a rational, socialist solution to the crisis of capitalism.

***

While certainly it is possible to criticize the Popular Front and the accommodation to the cultural and gender *status quo* it entailed, this view does not help us understand the role of the women who were already active during the early 1930s, for some of whom -- like Jim Watts and Dorothy Livesay, to be studied more closely in chapters five, six and seven -- the decision to join the CPC was (in part)

---

motivated by an ideal of sexual freedom and egalitarianism. What drew such women to a Party increasingly intent on embracing the middle-class culture and family values one might have expected them to critique? And how can we explain that as CPC members they were often *empowered*, not marginalized, in a Party adopting such familialist discourses? What does their involvement with the CPC throughout this period tell us about the formative effects of gender and sex?

In thinking about the reception of Party leadership amongst women, and specifically those prominent female members whom one would expect to have rejected this appeal to family and traditionalism regarding women in/and the party, Gayatri Spivak’s notion of “strategic essentialism” is helpful. This refers to the use of sexual difference as a provisional basis of identification and action, a proceeding on the basis of a singular aspect of identity, an aspect always integrated with and inflected by its other aspects, but which, for tactical purposes, is acted upon as definitive. Acts of strategic essentialism are appropriations of the political effects of identification, and such appropriations are enacted as provisional. They provide a contingent basis for action, and are not invulnerable to historical and social fluctuations. They appropriate essentialism in order to subvert it.312

There are overtones of such “essentialism” throughout the Communist coverage of women in the period of the Popular Front. Good examples come from the stories about women’s sports in the Communist Press. A weekly column, “With Our Women, In Sport and Play,” authored by “Lil” began with the first issue of the *Daily Clarion* on 1 May 1936. In addressing and encouraging women’s interest in sport, Lil injected the idea of sexual egalitarianism in a very practical and engaging way. Written in an informal, wisecracking style, the column combined reports on the highlights of women’s sports with anecdotal stories poking mild fun at

---

conventional ideas about manly and womanly behaviour. The first column told readers about female wrestling fans in Dallas, Texas, who

   certainly showed their enthusiasm for that sport. So much so that the manager of the auditorium had to cancel the wrestling promoters’ contract with the auditorium. He claimed that the women, excited by the cauliflowered athletes, punched holes galore in to the upholstering with their high-heeled shoes. Now he’ll just have respectable audiences who will respectfully listen to symphonies.\footnote{“With the Girls in Sport and Play, by Lil,” \textit{Daily Clarion}, 1 May 1936, 10.}

Clearly Lil approves of the female fans’ enthusiasm. While this was a portrayal of female spectators’ appreciation for male muscularity, Lil’s stories also (and more often) highlighted women who joined in competition. Lil urged women to test themselves in sport and recreation, and to break stereotypes as well as records. Such cultural initiatives of popular frontism offered diversity rather than tradition or convention. Columns such as Lil’s used conventional ideas about gender as a foil to introduce different possibilities for women, presenting them as developing individuals and competitors, not only as mothers or workers.

A similar “strategic essentialism” can be found in the text of an appeal written by the Women’s Section of the Provincial Workers’ Council of British Columbia and published in \textit{The Worker} on 8 December 1934. This was introduced by the editor as a question of “vital importance ... for all sections of the labor movement.” The appeal began by noting its purpose: to draw more women into the unemployed movement. Few women were involved in part because of “the low interest of women themselves, due to lack of understanding, as to what they have to gain for themselves and their children by participating in the movement.” But this particular appeal is directed to men, not to women. The writers ask for men’s support in helping women overcome their lack of understanding. But then they proceed to the heart of their case: women were not joining the unemployed movement because they were tied too closely to
the home. The appeal is directed to men because what was most needed was not
education for women, but help at home and a change in men’s attitude.314 Men are
asked to take part in the household and caring work, and to overcome their
bourgeois attitude toward their family: “However much you may desire to leave the
women and children in what you may deem a position of safety at home while you
fight their battle abroad, it cannot be accomplished in this way, and you must have
the women fighting shoulder to shoulder with you in the struggle for better living
conditions today and the emancipation of the working class to-morrow.” This appeal
shows the coexistence within the CPC of an astute and acute assessment of the
woman question on the part of many members, female and male, and the persistence
of masculinist visions of social order and gendered work. The appeal points out that
the burden of class inequality is compounded for women by sexual inequality: “You
are enslaved politically and economically as members of the working class but in
addition to our political and economic enslavement, there is also our sexual
enslavement as women.” The authors cite Engels’s depiction of the family in The
Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State as the microcosm of unjust relations
in capitalist society, but also (and crucially) point out that

[r]ecognition of the cause and source of this antagonism is not
sufficient excuse for allowing it to continue unabated amongst those
of us who say we understand this. Much can be done to lessen and
overcome this by conscious effort on our part. This cannot be
entirely eliminated under the present system of society but with
your help, male comrades and fellow workers, much can be done to
overcome this.

Whether as workers or as housewives, the appeal insisted that women were citizens
with the same political rights and interests as men. This was obviously not the
operative view among the mostly male CPC membership, to whom the authors

314 Joan Sangster details the course of an earlier and more sustained campaign in the Ukrainian Labor
Farmer Temple Association against men’s chauvinism and indifference to women’s political
marginalization in “Robitnytsia, Ukranian Communists and the ‘Porcupinism’ Debate: Reassessing
Gender, Ethnicity and Class in Early Canadian Communism, 1922-1930,” Labour / Le Travail 56 (2005):
51-90.
direct a veiled challenge: “Do you recognize the right your wife has to freedom from home part of the time? Do you offer her this freedom while you carry on the household tasks and the care of the children which you together with her, brought into the world and for whom you are jointly responsible?” The appeal closes on a conciliatory note: “We hope we have not offended you by the above statements, but that they will result in better work by all of us in the unemployed movement.”

In the only response in the Worker to the B.C. women’s appeal, a reader, clearly misunderstanding the point of the women’s letter, inadvertently revealed the extent to which gender essentialism undergirded much of the Communist worldview. The reader’s letter starts:

We must have the women folk of the workers understand why we cannot get better conditions for the workers if the men do not do their part in the organization to which they belong or should belong. We must get it across to the women so they will not hold their men back. I know of several instances where the men are keen to do something for organizations, but to keep peace with their wives they stay home and leave it to some one else. Would it be possible to have a women’s page, and not use too deep economic phrases etc., so they will become interested too? The majority of women I have heard object and say to their men “you had better get a job and never mind the unemployed meetings”, or such as this, “you’ll never get anywhere mixing with them people they’ll say you’re red”. Now my point is, we have enough intimidation from the boss class in these small communities without having it home, too, so let’s see if The Worker can help the workers to overcome this objection at home. Some women read The Worker too and then deny the men the right to have it because it is militant, and then that’s that, and The Worker agent has to look for another customer. So let’s have a women’s page and convert them from their capitalistic intuitions.

The Canadian women who had written the “Appeal to Men Workers” had asked men to consider the effect of their attitudes and actions on the sort of life that

---

315 Appeal to Men Workers Gives an Airing to a Neglected Subject,” The Worker, 8 December 1934, 6.
316 This letter is introduced by the editors with a caveat: “(Note: Many letters are received by the editors not all of which can be published and some of which cannot be answered because of lack of time and forces. However, all are carefully read, and suggestions adopted where practical. In this column from time to time we publish extracts from those of general interest.)” Hopefully the editors did not approve of the writer’s depiction of women’s “capitalistic intuitions” but wanted to endorse the suggestion the writer made for a women’s page in The Worker. “Letters to the Editor,” The Worker, 19 December 1934, 2.
women could lead, in private and public. They had asked men to think about
women, not as women but as citizens, with the rights and privileges this entailed.
This appeal took seriously the notion that the family could be a democracy in
miniature, where women and men worked together and possessed the same rights
and privileges. Suggesting, perhaps, some of the dangers of the tactic of strategic
essentialism, their male interlocutors had taken up their argument that “women”
lacked understanding, but then overrode their pointed demand that men share in the
housework.

Despite all its noise about progressive families, most members and leaders
(including women) of the CPC adhered to a functionalist rather than a democratic
model of the family. Women mattered because they took care of men and children
and they were against war because they were mothers. Identifying the progressive
family as a hallmark of democracy was an important expansion of politics insofar as it
acknowledged the importance of men’s and women’s lives together. Understanding
one’s relation to husband or wife as “comrade” put the struggle to survive together at
the forefront of socialist politics. But the politicization of the family usually took a
more gendered than socialist form, and women, rather than men, continued to be
identified with the home front. In order for women to be able to fight “shoulder to
shoulder” with men in the unemployed movement, they needed the help of men at
home. What they had asked for in 1934 was a joining of forces between women and
men on every front. Instead, with the Popular Front, women’s identification with
home and family gained a credence it had previously been denied within the Party,
and women attained a new importance: they were the symbol of peace and progress.

317 It is possible that each of these letters was written by Daily Clarion staff writers to provoke readers
and enliven the correspondence section of the paper. This would indicate the degree of interest in
the subject of women’s status in the movement and opposition to male chauvinism among
communists. It might also indicate that ‘the woman question’ was exploited as a means to engage
readers and was not itself taken very seriously by the Daily Clarion’s editorial staff.
This reinforced their identification with home and family, now set in a positive light, but didn’t significantly expand their scope as wives and mothers.

Unlike discussions of the woman worker or the working-class housewife, men’s position in the home was not often the subject of stories and articles in the Party press. The affirmation of men’s role in the home, as father and husband, and in the wider working-class movement came through as the subtext of women’s stories, of working class wives’ (often belated) identification with their class, and their (ringing or tender) endorsement of class unity. Working-class men were portrayed in such stories as dependent on their wives for the affirmation of their masculinity, and masculinity itself is portrayed as a tenuous negotiation with forces beyond one’s control (including one’s wife). The implication is that good planning and management on all levels could achieve a steady balance in which mutual – social and family – happiness will flourish. In a word: socialism.

***

Over the next several years the intensified struggle against fascism helped usher in a more popular form of communist politics. In a sense this made the Party much more effective, but did it diminish the critical aspect of its class-based politics? Putting the family at the centre of political organization and mobilization was an important and in many ways a very productive step for the Party. In the Popular Front women were crucial, both in what they did and what they represented. The Party’s representation of women changed as the CPC adopted a more populist style of politics and cultivated the support of the middle as well as working class. The depiction of women illustrates that the revolutionary implications of class politics were muted but not dropped, as women were integrated into the movement as both family-focused wives and class-conscious militants. Women’s status in the movement
was further complicated by a doubled vision of present and future: only socialism would guarantee the security of their families, and only socialism would set women free from their identification with family. At the same time that the *Daily Clarion* used stereotypical and traditional ideas about women and family, mothers and peace as political ballast for socialism, and tied their political empowerment to their gendered social place, it also nurtured member’s faith that in the movement and under socialism women could do and be anything they wanted.

***

In the early months of the Spanish Civil War, July 1936 to January 1937, women were on the frontlines of battle, as militia members and medical workers. On 21 August 1936 the front page of the *Daily Clarion* carried a photograph of five young Spanish women with rifles, all in pants and military caps. Each was smiling, one with a bayonet attached to her rifle. The caption reads: “Spanish girls, answering the call of their ‘La Passionaria’ [sic] arm themselves to defend the Republic in Spain against the fascist hordes. They are in the forefront of this fight for democracy.”

The *Daily Clarion*’s “With Our Women” column urged Canadian women to attend demonstrations in support of Republican Spain and praised Spanish women for their bravery: “Whilst we do our fighting on “relief fronts,” our Spanish women comrades are actually on the battle front.” In Toronto, Alice Cooke asked Canadian women to support the campaign to aid Spain. She opened her weekly column “With Our Women” urging female readers to turn out in full force for the rally on 21 October: “The Spanish women are in the forefront of the struggle for democracy. Their heroism, self-sacrifice and loyalty not only to the Spanish people, but to the people

---

the world over is a guide and inspiration to all liberty-loving people.”

Throughout the summer and autumn of 1936 stories in the Daily Clarion presented Spanish women as heroic, joining their brothers, fathers, and husbands on the frontlines, willing to give their lives in defence of the Republic that had liberated them from church and state repression. Women’s military participation was portrayed as both honourable and anomalous. Peace-loving women had been driven to extraordinary measures in defence of all Spanish civilians, men, women and children. For liberal and left sympathizers, the Spanish Civil War forged an association between the Popular Front movement and the family, a combination of traditional ideas with radical imperatives.

One Communist (PCE) member of the Popular Front government formed in February 1936, Dolores Ibarruri, became the most important symbol of the Spanish Republic, a revered figure within Spain and among socialists in every country. Ibarruri claimed she was only doing her duty, “as a Spanish woman and as the wife of a miner, to defend with every power at my disposal the rights of the people and particularly of the working people. There is nothing outstanding in my own life. I suffered persecution. I have been in jail. I am fighting not just for Spain, but for the world against fascism.”

In September, 1936 she went to France to raise money and munitions. She also asked specifically for aid to Spanish children, in the form of food, clothing, medicines, and blankets. Appealing especially to American women, La Pasionaria told the world that Spanish children were in an increasingly desperate situation: “American women, and mothers throughout the world must realize that Spanish children today are going unfed and unclothed, and, often one or both parents are at the front.”

Spanish children and families were paying the price of fighting fascism. Ibarurri wanted to bring the costs of fascism home to Europeans.

---

322 “Pasionaria Asks Aid for Children,” Daily Clarion, 10 September 1936, 2.
and North Americans. Images of women’s heroism were meant to elicit urgently-needed political and material support.

The Communist Parties were instrumental in organizing the International Brigades and consequently exerted much influence over them. The Soviet Union in turn influenced the conduct of the Republican Army through its sales of arms to the Loyalists. In the early days of the Spanish Civil War, female combatants (milicianas) fought alongside men in communist, republican and anarchist regiments. Many regiments were made up of (mostly) men and women, but within weeks of the outbreak, the Communist Party Espagne (CPE) had organized a women’s only battalion, the Batallón Femenino del 5th Regimiento des Milicias Populares. Lisa Lines establishes the significant combat contribution made by Spanish women:

The defence of Madrid is probably the most prominent example of rearguard milicianas participating in combat...Despite the fact that women comprised a significant percentage of the fighting force in Carabanchel, and despite the large part played by these and other women in the Battle of Madrid, it is very rare to find information about them included in general histories of the siege.\textsuperscript{323}

After the battle of Guadalajara in April of 1937, the Spanish Republican army was reorganized into regular army units, under one command. After Juan Negrin became prime minister in May of 1937, the government ruled that women were to be kept back from the frontlines.

While Canadian readers of the Daily Clarion’s admired Spanish women’s courage, Soviet women could identify with it. And, according to reports, Soviet women were unstinting in their support and solidarity: “Their eyes flashing and their fists raised, Soviet women in mass-meetings at Moscow and Leningrad and throughout the Soviet Union are pledging themselves to aid the embattled women of Spain.” The imagery defining this story — of fiery women workers with fists raised — was an affirmation, increasingly rare in the Communist press of the day, of women’s

strength and militancy as they readied themselves for their part in political struggle and revolution. Soviet women’s fighting spirit was incited by fascism, but the story also conveyed a distinctly Communist militancy: “Amid cries of ‘Long live the revolutionary government of Spain,’ ‘Long live the Communist Party throughout the world,’ and ‘Long live the people’s leader, Comrade Stalin,’ a resolution was adopted in support of the fight of the Spanish people against the fascists.” For all its emphasis on militant Soviet amazons, the story nonetheless captured the elements of the Popular Front ethos: international unity, peace, progressivism, and the people.

After 1936 the CP press increasingly used women’s association with family and nurturing to highlight the historic significance of the Spanish conflict. The incongruous combination of mothering and militarism offered a particularly compelling image to editorial writers seeking to rouse wide support for Republican Spain. The image of women on the frontlines offered a condensed account of the Popular Front everywhere: the militant demand for peace, democracy and progress. For the rest of the world, Spanish women on the frontlines represented the essence of antifascism. This was expressed in an editorial reprinted at the end of August 1936 in the Daily Clarion:

> With your babe at breast and your rifle in hand; tending the wounded and succoring the dying; shoulder to shoulder with their men folk along the dusty roads of Spain; surging out of medieval darkness into the bright sunshine of freedom; fiercest among fighters against Franco’s hordes – women of Spain, we salute you!

Like Soviet women, Spanish women had been politically empowered by their government, their lives transformed not through their own efforts but through progressive governance: “Women who three weeks ago went to church with a Bible and veil now carry a gun, drag their children out of the stuffy convent cells and organize new schools in the requisitioned buildings. The medieval traditions which

---

surrounded the education and life of Spanish women have been definitely shattered. Side by side with the menfolk, they are learning to fight for their freedom.” As in the case of Soviet women, it is a revolutionary government that liberates women; the shroud of stifling tradition is lifted from women and they are transformed. This depiction highlights the importance of formal leadership to popular political empowerment.

The young Spanish women pictured in the *Daily Clarion* were proof that women could do virtually anything if the need existed and the cause was just. In accompanying stories women’s bravery was linked to their love for their families and for Spain. The portrayal of women in this period helped project a view of Spanish society as an organic whole struggling to defend its integrity and health. Spanish women were no longer secluded, separated or subordinated, and their involvement in the Civil War conveyed the balance of strength and support, production and reproduction, that ‘progress’ represented for the Popular Front movement. The 16 February coalition had brought women “into the light of day” where they were learning, growing and developing. This corresponded to the early days, to the sense that the revolution, if allowed to run its course, without intervention, would prevail over Franco’s effort to re-establish a reactionary regime. As the revolution lost ground, and became dependent on international and Soviet assistance, the portrayal of women became more traditional. Sensitive to the criticism that the Republic was turning Spanish women into amazons, by 1937 women were removed from the front lines and returned to more traditional work, such as nursing and teaching.

But in September, 1936 Spanish women were most often portrayed in the *Daily Clarion* as fighters, as in the picture of a young militiawoman, with the caption: “Bring on those fascists.” Accounts of women in these roles, as well as in their

---

traditional roles as wives and mothers, teachers and nurses, conveyed the message that women were just as passionate antifascists as men (described as ‘their menfolk’) but that their motivation was maternal. Women’s presence on the front lines was more significant because it was exceptional; it was also acceptable because it was exceptional. The revolutionary implications of women’s presence on the front lines of battle was restrained by its heterosexual framework, the understanding of men and women as socially interdependent and constitutionally exclusive. Paradoxically, the line between masculine and feminine became more rather than less important in the way Spanish loyalists were portrayed in the CPC press. Spanish women were fighting as wives, sisters, mothers and daughters, in defense of Spanish democracy. They were affirming their relationships as wives, sisters, mothers and daughters, their orientation and affiliation to their men. The Soviet need for alliance with bourgeois democratic states ensured that the involvement of women in the Spanish Civil War was contained within familiar ideological territory.

La Pasionaria identified the Republican cause with family security, with reverence and protection of life against the destruction of fascism. Allegorically, La Pasionaria was the heart of Spain. She was an immensely effective leader because of her position as mother and wife. Her effect as a leader and symbol was to ennoble those who fought for Spanish democracy against fascism. Her power as a speaker for the people and the Party was tied to the role women traditionally fill in patriarchal societies. It was because she embodied traditional ideas about women and mothers so flawlessly, transposed the language of filiation into defence of the loyalists so vividly, that La Pasionaria was so very effective in building support for Spain and for antifascism.

The coverage of Spanish women in this period illustrates the co-presence of emancipatory and accommodating ideals within Popular Front discourse in Canada. Newspaper coverage contained diverse depictions and views of women in the early
days of the Spanish Civil War. In the months following the insurrection, images of young women wielding rifles were gradually replaced by increasingly conventional portrayals of women and their role in Spanish society. Just as Soviet socialism was hailed as liberating women (particularly Muslim women of the eastern areas) and setting them on the path to full – modern – fulfillment as workers, the Spanish Republican government was congratulated for delivering Spanish women’s equality. In each case much was made of the fact that women’s entry into public life as workers did not compromise their interest in love, romance, and motherhood. Women were empowered as workers but retained the interests and virtues associated with ‘real’ – presumably innate – womanhood. A similar distinction between sexual identity and social identity was not made in the case of men. In these representations, men’s work and men’s fighting are shown to be the sources of historical change; the transformations of women into workers and soldiers are the results of political reforms launched by men, Communists foremost among them.

In October, 1936 the Daily Clarion published one photograph of female Spanish sharpshooters in formation, another of women marching in uniform, carrying rifles on their shoulders. The captions were a variation on “The Embattled Women of Spain, Ready to Die in Defense of Democratic Liberty.” Within a year, however, women were no longer pictured bearing arms and appeared in news stories of the frontlines as nurses and hospital workers only. Heterosexual order prevailed in less dramatic contexts also. In Canada, Annie Buller’s appeal for donations to aid Spanish democracy emphasized the bond between Canadian and Spanish women: “Canadian womanhood, passionately devoted to the cause of peace and democracy, whose heart most readily understands and responds to the cry for help of the mothers and wives of agonized Spain, should be the first to rally behind the

---

327 Daily Clarion, 10 October 1936, 3.
movement launched by the Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy.  Women were central to the antifascist movement, but women’s agency and investment in the cause was attributed to their gendered nature rather than to their political interest or intelligence. Because they were women, they naturally — and passionately — opposed fascism.

****

Throughout the Popular Front, the Party continued to define the health and progressivism of the working-class family against the parasitical character of its bourgeois counterpart. Progressive elements of the middle class were appealed to, but cooperation hinged on their support for socialism and working-class unity. In the Popular Front the Party sought to mobilize Canadian women on the basis of their identification as women, on behalf of socialism and anti-fascism. Sectarianism was replaced by the idea of ‘progressivism’ as an ethos shared by both working and middle class and embodied by the working-class family. In this shift, the importance of women was recognized at the level of community and politics, but in a way that reinforced women’s identification with family and their unpaid work as mothers.

The CPC’s recognition of the social role women played as mothers, its reconfiguration of maternalism as a public resource, accommodated the somewhat contrary idea that women were much more than mothers. Women in the Clarion could indeed fly planes, drive trains, and shoulder a rifle. The argument that it was class-determined acculturation rather than biology behind women’s social behaviour was an important element in rallying women to socialism and solidarity against fascism. Paradoxically, the CPC encouraged Canadian women to expand the scope

---

328 Daily Clarion, 27 October 1936, 1.
329 Rachel Blau Duplessis writes that it is difficult "to lose the notion of a service function for female gender no matter the revolutionary proposals in which service functions are thrillingly embedded." See Rachel Blau Duplessis, "Manifests," Diacritics 26, No. 3/4 (Autumn-Winter 1996): 47.
of their work beyond the home, but made its case for women’s greater political involvement by appealing to women’s identification with family and social welfare.

Its portrayal of Amelia Earhart illustrates the efforts the CPC press devoted to align itself with progressive ideas about women as well as drawing on prevailing views associating women with home and family in making its case for peace and socialism. Interviewed in New York by Lillian Cooper for the *Daily Worker*, Earhart was presented as the American counterpart to Soviet women: politically engaged, passionate about peace, youthful, independent and utterly attractive. Earhart tells the reporter: “I hope to have the courage to face the penitentiary if need be, in my advocacy of peace.” Earhart embodied the case for women’s equality, yet her political outlook was labour-based, not feminist. The interviewer meets Earhart as she is “bending over the motor of her plane, working diligently. . . wearing a flying outfit, pants and a checkered shirt.” Earhart wasn’t shy about talking to a reporter from the labour press, and told Cooper proudly: “I have always earned my own living and I think everyone should, as the only social basis for the future.” After describing the Soviet Union as the “most interesting government development in the world today,” Earhart endorsed the unionization of airplane workers, and pointed out that one pilot in the air depended on fifty mechanics on the ground. Earhart is presented not as a star, but as a worker. She might be seen in the media as “America’s greatest flying woman,” but in reality, and in her own eyes, she was a *working* woman.330

The story on Earhart was characteristic of the effusive coverage working women received in the CPC press. Stories detailed the accomplishments of American women in flight, science, exploration and art. By far the most numerous and most glowingy-rendered women were young Soviet working women. Soviet women were the happiest women in the world, because they were recognized by the state as citizens and as workers, and supported as mothers. Soviet women were able

---

to develop themselves because the burden of social prejudice and religious dogma had been lifted from their shoulders by the CPSU. The new Soviet woman proved her worth through dedication to the Party and excellence in her work. Yet while empowered Soviet women were hard workers and serious citizens, they remained womanly women. Stories depicting Soviet women as devoted party officials and exemplary Stakhanovites also always mentioned their gaiety, their social and recreational life, their sweethearts, their families.

The well-rounded lives of Soviet women provided images and narratives that contrasted sharply with those coming from Nazi Germany. Stories depicting the very different lives of women in the Soviet Union and Germany illustrated the reactionary character of fascism. Rather than empowering women through education, training, and work, the German government barred women from study and employment, and confined them to unpaid reproductive work. The status of women in Nazi Germany was an indictment of fascism as capitalist reaction and organized inhumanity, while Soviet women were held up and hailed as symbols of socialism: productive, peaceful, and progressive.

Soviet women were portrayed in the Canadian party press as workers *and* women. The state guaranteed their right to work, and according to accounts, Soviet women could choose what they worked at, including mothering. The very structure of the workers’ state, based as it was on the abolition of capital, guaranteed that the painful contradictions of Canadian women’s working lives, shaped by such tensions as private vs. public, reproductive vs. productive, home labour vs. waged labour, could be overcome. Common ownership meant that for Soviet women work, including women’s reproductive labour as wives and mothers, was no longer an alienating experience. As Engels discussed in *The Origin of the Family: Private Property and the State*, the family (as distinct from the clan) arrived with the institution of private property. The bourgeois says that family is a blood relation, but it is the gendered relation to property that gives the family a social valence that the
of government had 'socialized' the family (and by unconscionable extrapolation, 'prostituted' Soviet women). The logic of the family was transferred to the relation between the party and workers, the state and citizens. The ‘New Soviet family’ continued to be the old reproductive family, but it was also, figuratively, the bond between workers, state and nation. Having formally annulled the distinction between private and public that defined bourgeois society, the CPSU could claim that women were not subordinated in the socialist family. Yet the idea of ‘family’ as representative of order, as hierarchical affiliation and obligation remained and became the basis of the relation between the Party and the people.

This imagery became dominant over the course of the 1930s, but it did not originate with Stalin. Lenin had used the term ‘the socialist fatherland’ in 1918 and possibly earlier. The ideological efficiency of the term relied on the associations attached to motherhood and fatherhood, the two mutually constitutive, exclusive and sustaining. In applying these to the Soviet state and nation, the two are joined in an apparently seamless and ‘naturally’ ordained patriarchal relationship. The state – the socialist fatherland – is not itself the source of power, but gives crucial structure and meaning to that source, the mythologized Russian nation, figured as female.

This deeply masculinist version of the family and the relation between state and nation modeled on it helped to establish (symbolically) the state’s authority over the nation. The state’s authority as leader to the Russian nation was naturalized through this paternalistic version of family. And although Stalin was not the first or last to use the term ‘the socialist fatherland,’ he did much to make this analytically inviolable, beginning with the campaign to protect the revolution in the months after Sergei Kirov’s murder in December of 1934.

fact of blood ties does not achieve. The communist does not dismiss the family as a blood relation, but as a social relation that achieves its meaning and force from its non-social origin in private property. For the communist, the family itself is not the problem. Rather, the family’s problematic status stems from the fact that it obscures private property and enables relations of domination and alienation to masquerade as love and duty.

Ruth Frager demonstrates in *Sweatshop Strife* that ideas about women and womanhood are historically elastic. This account of women in / and the CPC supports this view and indicates that the political salience of gender is linked to this flexibility. For the Communist Party of Canada in the early 1930s, middle-class women, with their hysterical symptoms and single-minded faith in gaining votes for women, were seen as a symptom of capitalism’s decline. In contrast, the broader perspective of working-class women represented the health and vigour of the working class, the rising class that would replace capitalism with socialism. Just as capitalism and communism were conceived as opposites in the Third Period, so were bourgeois and proletarian women. With the shift to the Popular Front in 1935 the relation between working-class and bourgeois womanhood became one of continuity rather than inversion. Between 1929 and 1935 the Canadian Party reversed itself, organizing and addressing women in 1935 on the basis of a universal sense of their gendered interests and identification with home and family, an approach it had repudiated in 1929. Ideas about who and what women were and how best to organize them shifted significantly within the Party (a point which vitiates the claim that the CPC only reflected prevailing views on gender in Canadian society). This pattern and many others on the left illustrates the historicity of discourse on gender and sexuality.\(^{333}\) Whether as the opposite to its bourgeois counterpart, or as variations on a continuum, the portrayal of gender and specifically of womanhood within CPC discourse was often contradictory. This did not reflect a lack of knowledge about or interest in women on the part of the Party. It reflected what Sedgwick has argued is the formative “discursive incoherence” at the centre of twentieth-century culture. Sedgwick’s point is that “contests for discursive power can be specified as competitions for the material or rhetorical leverage required to set the terms of, and

\(^{333}\) Judith Butler makes this point in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
to profit in some way from, the operations of such an incoherence of definition." 334

It was not what or who women were that was important in the Party's representations of women, but how they figured ideologically in class politics. The Party sought to strengthen and justify its leadership through establishing patriarchal order as the basis of the international proletarian movement. In this order the gendered division of labour is simultaneously useful and unchanging, contingent and ahistorical.

Rather than asking what its recognition of gender as politically meaningful meant for the Party and for women in the Party, we need to ask what it did for the Party and for the women directly affected by its change in focus. The shift from ignoring to celebrating women as wives and mothers helped to bring the Party closer to the Canadian public. The CPC’s orientation to women as women helped extend the reach and relevance of class politics, by acknowledging family and private life as important sites of political mobilization. It may seem obvious that this incorporation was untenable within a class-theoretical framework, that it was a further development in the protracted process through which the CPC (with the Soviet Union) relinquished its bearings. According to this view, the recognition of sex-based subjectivity as politically valid contradicts and compromises the theoretical framework of class politics. From such a perspective, class difference shapes sexual difference and is definitive as the exclusive basis of political consciousness and historical change. With the embrace of the socialist woman as a powerful figure in CPC rhetoric, the Party introduced an element into its ideological framework that it could not analytically accommodate. Equally clear, yet more difficult to unravel, are the ways that the CPC’s analytical framework was animated by contradictory ideas about class and gender.

---

Chapter Four

“Abrim with action and struggle”: Communism’s Cultural Front

Communists sought a cultural revolution. The interwar period provided favourable conditions in which to organize one. Communists wanted Canadians to come to see the world in revolutionary terms -- to recognize the evils of capitalism, the oppressiveness of the political system, and the possibilities of living otherwise, in a socialist society like that being built in the Soviet Union. Communists wanted Canadians to produce poems, plays, paintings, histories and happenings that performed the possibilities of resisting capitalism and constructing its socialist alternative.

Yet, just as they changed over time with regard to their overall political positioning, as we have seen in earlier chapters, so too did they change with respect to cultural innovations. And with respect to cultural patterns, these transformations, although they were associated with the “line changes” of the Comintern, corresponded with them in an intricately indigenous fashion. This complexity partly stemmed from the fact that such cultural shifts often took place within the Soviet Union, rather than being explicitly engineered by the Comintern, so that the national parties outside the Soviet Union and the activists associated with them did not register such changes automatically or quickly. Unlike the CI’s political directives, which were directly conveyed to the national parties, cultural changes internal to the Soviet Union took time to reach and influence non-Russian Communists. Moreover, such cultural changes often proceeded from complicated Soviet debates in which distinguishing one side from the other might be difficult. And, for Canadians, this intricate situation was further affected by two additional factors -- the cultural and spatial peculiarities of the Party, constituted as it was by a majority of non-Anglo-Celtic members, spread out over a vast country, divided
between two major linguistic groups, yet also significantly concentrated in Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver; and the extremely aggressive policies of the R.B. Bennett administration from 1930 to 1935, some of which had the inadvertent consequence of elevating the CPC’s cultural activists into unanticipated positions of leadership and influence.

The CPC welcomed women such as Florence Custance, Beckie Buhay, and later, Jean Watts and Dorothy Livesay into its ranks. How well they did within the Communist movement depended, in part, upon their own respective qualities of determination and initiative, but perhaps in larger part upon the often difficult-to-predict context of Canadian Communist politics. As with most male Communists, so it was with these women: only a very few could spend most of their adult lives adapting to the often extraordinary heat of the Party’s internal life and the changes in policy and direction, often subtly conveyed, recommended by Moscow. Their empowerment and longevity as CPC members was determined in large part by how closely their own political objectives, ideals, and strategies meshed with those of the Party.

This chapter looks at the general context of cultural politics within the Communist Party of Canada from the late 1920s to the late 1930s. As explored in Chapter Two, the movement underwent two radical changes, a first one in 1928/9 with the imposition of the ‘Third Period,’ and a second one in 1934/5, with the coming of the Popular Front. Both transitions had a broad and complicated impact on cultural work within the Party, especially for those who wanted to see in Communism a convincing alternative to the cultural contradictions of capitalism. This chapter’s first section will look at the Third Period. It will pay special attention to two developments in particular: Masses magazine and the adoption of agitprop strategies by CPC-related theatre activists. The chapter’s second section will then examine the Popular Front, with a special focus on New Frontier magazine and the
transition from the demand for “proletarian literature” to the call for a “new literature,” i.e., poetry and fiction largely produced by professional middle-class authors and intellectuals. It will analyze the new general line on culture, one that emphasized not the replacement of bourgeois culture by its revolutionary rival but rather the continuing evolution of accepted cultural forms under the auspices of an enlightened working class guided by the CPC.

Debates over theater offer, in condensed form, an insight into the cultural complexity of the movement’s transitions. With respect to the Soviet Union, Marina Mogil’ner points out that in 1932, “the political strategy changed and the regime allied itself with the bureaucracy and the new ‘specialists,’ the trend toward cultural monopoly and universality made ... militant egalitarian ‘theaters’ undesirable. At the National Olympiad of Amateur Art in Moscow in 1932, it was clear that the short heyday of the agitbrigady was over.”\(^{335}\) The May-June 1933 issue of Masses reported on the Second Enlarged Plenum of the International Union of Revolutionary Theatres (IURT), meeting in Moscow. The report explained that the IURT had been “organized two years ago as an organization of the proletarian amateur theatre and has made tremendous inroads not only among workers organized in the various workers’ theatre groups but also among those sections of the art intelligentsia which realize that the only way out of the present capitalist crisis on the cultural field as well as on the economic and political field is the revolutionary way.”\(^{336}\) The report went on to describe the sort of criticism that each delegation brought to the plenum, and a list of shortcomings in the work of revolutionary theatre troupes around the world. There was a new attitude toward professional and bourgeois theatre coming from Moscow. In 1932 Party leaders were beginning to consolidate socialist realism as a new aesthetic ideology. At a Moscow convention on

---


amateur art, national *agitprop* troupes were criticized for their lack of polish, their simple plots, and their emphasis on agitation. The earlier *agitprop* style of theatre had been based on an understanding of actors and audience within a shared field of action, interacting in a way that blurred the distinction between them. Art workers saw themselves as comrades in the class struggle with those who came to participate in their work. *Agitprop* was conceived not as a style of representation but an instance of solidarity and struggle. In 1932, it was swiftly passing out of favour in an ever-more-hierarchical, if also increasingly chaotic, Soviet Union.

In the cases of both *agitprop* and socialist realism, it is important to underline the ways in which a general line enunciated by the Russian party and echoed in the Comintern could give rise to debates and uncertainties about how best to apply it in Canada. As always, and as traditionalists will always emphasize, one can hardly overlook the Soviet Union in any attempt to grasp the CPC’s Depression-era cultural innovations, whether theatrical or in other spheres. In a provocative essay, “What is Cultural Revolution?” Michael David-Fox argues that Bolshevik leaders used cultural revolution to achieve a doubled transformation, directed both inward (the CP, the leadership) and outward (the masses, the “backward” population of the USSR). His point is that cultural revolution was important for the CPSU leadership at every step of the way, not simply as a way of asserting and imposing Bolshevik leadership. He argues that a necessary step forward for Soviet historiography “is to open up the two-way street between Communists’ attempt to remake others and their ongoing quest to transform themselves.” Critical scholarly attention to such dialogism in the North American communist movement is also necessary.

In the early 1930s, the expulsion of “left deviationists” from the various CPs and the political dominance of Stalin formed the basis for a more unified Soviet approach to the cultural front, both domestically and internationally. Stalin’s

---

program of a “Great Break” with bourgeois cultural hegemony was deemed a success in 1931, and in 1932 Stalin and the CPSU declared Soviet socialism a *fait accompli*.\(^{338}\)

The 1920s dream of creating a *proletkultur* was set to one side (and many of its partisans removed from their positions of influence); in its place, socialist realism became the prevailing theory and practice of socialist culture.\(^{339}\) The emphasis shifted from building a brand new proletarian culture in the Soviet Union to asserting and reinforcing the existence of Soviet socialism as both a political and cultural reality. The emphasis of Soviet cultural work was no longer the reflection or embodiment of a specifically proletarian identity, but of the new Soviet socialist citizen. Stalin’s “Great Break” can be seen not as an assertion of proletarian politics and culture as against their bourgeois predecessors and competitors, but as an expansion of these bourgeois forms into new, definitive and universal categories. The fascination with *proletkult* receded, gradually replaced by the championing of a broadly-defined “people’s culture.” An initial fascination with modernism -- typified by the vogue for Tatlin’s sculptures, Rodchenko’s productivist paintings, and Mayakovsky’s stark revolutionary poetry -- gave way, under official pressure, to socialist realism, with its very different representational strategies, many of them reminiscent of nineteenth-century romanticism. The initial connection between communism and modernism was initially obscured and eventually severed.

Such a sea-change in Soviet cultural life was not automatically or quickly registered in the very different cultural climate of North America, especially not before 1935. The CPC was different things for different sectors of its membership.

\(^{338}\) Ibid. See also Lynn Mally, *Culture of the Future: The Proletkult Movement in Revolutionary Russia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

\(^{339}\) Lynn Mally summarizes this transition: “After dissolving the many contentious groups that had dominated Soviet cultural life, the regime began to formulate an official Soviet aesthetic, “socialist realism.” This elusive genre bore some similarities to Proletkult cultural theories. Like Bogdanov, the shapers of socialist realism believed that art served an active social role. They also insisted that cultural creation be simple, clear, and easily accessible to the masses, characteristics that echoed at least part of the Proletkult’s artistic platform during the Civil War. But at this point similarities ended. Proletkultists believed that culture in the broadest sense was a means to awaken creative independence and to express proletarian class consciousness. By contrast, the advocates of socialist realism saw art as a didactic medium through which to educate the toiling masses in the spirit of socialism.” Mally, *Culture of the Future*, 250.
and leadership. The direct impact of the Soviet cultural revolution on the CPC itself was negligible. In Canada, there were open and challenging cultural debates, ones not readily settled by appeal to distant authority. Moreover, thanks to R.B. Bennett’s repressive policies, the beleaguered leadership of the CPC was not in any position to give cultural direction to the Party, with the consequence that the most interesting initiatives were taken, largely unimpeded by Party orthodoxy, by a new crowd of activists. Moreover, also thanks in part to the repressiveness of the government, there was for the first time a sizable middle-class constituency receptive to the Party’s message, particularly in Toronto. As this chapter traces the development of CPC-sponsored and -aligned cultural work from 1932 to 1939, it will frequently underline the significance of the CPC’s small middle-class urban constituency in shaping the Party’s cultural agenda. The project of building a proletarian culture was taken up by young intellectuals and artists, some of them from working-class backgrounds (such as Toby Gordon and Avrom Yanovsky), but many of them drawn from the middle class, and some highly trained in bourgeois culture. At all points in this period, this small group influenced the shape and direction of CPC-aligned cultural work.\textsuperscript{340}

These peculiarities of the Canadian context meant that, as revisionist historians so often point out, Soviet general indications were not mechanically

\textsuperscript{340} The CPC’s ethnic diversity means that ambitious generalizations based on the experiences of these Toronto activists may not fully apply in such outlying (but for Communists essential) regions as the Lakehead or among all the distinct ethnic groups that made up the Party. A full exploration of the cultural transformation of Communism as it affected the party’s many Finns, Jews and Ukrainians lies outside the scope of this thesis. For important articles on Communist culture in the CPC’s leading ethnic groups, see Taru Sundstén, “The Theatre of the Finnish-Canadian Labour Movement and its Dramatic Literature, 1900-1939,” in Michael G. Karni, ed., \textit{Finnish Diaspora: Canada, South America, Africa, Australia and Sweden} (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1981), 77-91; Peter Krawchuk, \textit{Our Stage: The Amateur Performing Arts of the Ukrainian Settlers in Canada}, trans. Mary Skrypnyk (Toronto: Kobzar, 1984); Ester Reiter, “Secular Yiddishkait: Left Politics, Culture, and Community,” \textit{Labour/Le Travail} 49 (Spring 2002), 121-146. For the impact of the Third Period on the “hall socialists” of the Lakehead, see Beaulieu, “Proletarian Prometheus,” Chapter 9. To my knowledge, there is no one work which correlates changes in the general Communist line with cultural changes among the CPC’s major ethnic constituencies taken together. It would be reasonable to assume that the vigorous anti-federalism of the Third Period would have affected the cultural programs of the minorities; it would also be reasonable to imagine that distance from Toronto, and the barriers of language, may have shielded such minorities from the full impact of attempts to homogenize their cultural lives.
transposed to Canadian realities — they were transformed and changed as Canadian Communists tried to make sense of them. A core argument of this chapter is that, notwithstanding its minimization by many memoirists and historians, the “cultural front” opened up by the CPC in the 1930s represented one of its most significant achievements. In his memoir, Yours in the Struggle, Tim Buck scarcely mentions cultural work. Yet for middle-class members, and for members of ethnic minorities, building a proletarian culture was one of the Party’s most important projects. They devoted much of their lives to creating a Canadian cultural revolution.

***

In Canada, as we have seen, the coming of the Third Period entrenched a younger group of CPC leaders under Tim Buck as General Secretary, and removed much of the first generation of CPC leaders. Less-experienced party members were placed in prominent positions. Younger members such as Stewart Smith, Beckie Buhay, Oscar Ryan, Leslie Morris, and in 1932, Stanley Ryerson, implemented a CI-endorsed politics of Marxism-Leninism in a party supposedly purged of both its left and right “deviations.”

In 1932 membership in the Communist Party of Canada began to grow. This was prompted from within the CPC by a renewed interest in middle-class recruitment, and from without by the public support created through the Canadian Labor Defence League’s publicity campaign against Section 98 of the Criminal Code of Canada. Amongst the new members were intellectuals and artists inspired by the possibilities communism offered for cultural initiatives. Their identification with communism was a mixture of cultural investment and political affiliation. For some of them, it came out of a perception that communism and cultural modernism went hand in hand. New ways of seeing and representing ideas in culture arose alongside
new, and purportedly more rational, visions of more rational forms of politics and society.

The idea of cultural revolution was an important element of the Third Period class-against-class politics announced in 1929. In the context of the Soviet Union itself, Sheila Fitzpatrick has interpreted this cultural moment as a discrete event in Soviet history designed by the CPSU for strategic purposes: “The purpose of Cultural Revolution was to establish communist and proletarian ‘hegemony’, which in practical terms meant both asserting party control over cultural life and opening up the administrative and professional elite to a new cohort of young Communists and workers.”

Authors such as Michael David-Fox, David Hoffman and Lynn Mally offer more complicated versions of this period and the transition, but they all acknowledge the scope of its impact. More than Fitzpatrick, they stress the ways the ideals of cultural revolution and socialist realism interacted with Soviet state-building and Communist international revolutionary politics. Where Fitzpatrick’s assessment presents the “great break” with bourgeois culture as a continuation of Bolshevik politics by cultural fiat, others see the relation between political and cultural transformation as key aspects of an evolving Soviet socialism. The “Great Break” had ended the Soviet Union’s dependence on bourgeois specialists and with this its need for class collaboration. From 1931 the Soviet Union asserted its equal status with bourgeois states, proclaimed its moral, social and political superiority over capitalism, and sought alliances with other nations, chiefly Britain and France.

From 1930 the Comintern had been encouraging national sections to welcome radicalized intellectuals into the Party, and had loosened its strictures against

---


involving middle-class sympathizers in the movement. In April 1932 Stalin affirmed the CPSU’s investment in cultural work when he called for the formation of a new, centralized writers’ union and endorsed socialist realism. This spurred Canadian YCL and CPC members’ interest in placing the Progressive Arts Club on a permanent footing.

Canadian middle-class students, intellectuals and artists were recruited in numbers after 1931. These members were interested in the “cultural front” of the revolution. Many were inspired by the Soviet endorsement of a formative role for culture in political transformation. Aside from Oscar Ryan, already a prominent member of the YCL and active at the upper levels of the CPC bureaucracy, most of those members who became active in cultural work were recent recruits and many, like Dorothy Livesay, Jean Watts, Stanley Ryerson and William Lawson, were of the middle class. With Ryan and Toby Gordon, the work of transferring and transplanting Soviet ideas about culture and cultural politics lay largely in their hands. The CPC leadership was not really in a position to guide or control this work. The most visible indication of their new prominence came with the emergence of the Progressive Arts Club, founded in 1931.

---

343. This was conveyed to the American delegation at the Kharkov Conference in 1930. See Judy Kutulas, The Long War: the Intellectual People’s Front and Anti-Stalinism, 1930-1940 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

344. According to David Arnason’s introduction to Right Hand Left Hand, Dorothy Livesay’s memoir, this began as an informal group meeting in 1929 to discuss the role of art in revolutionary politics. Arnason’s introduction makes little of the group’s affiliation to the CPC, treating it rather as an indigenous – and classless – cultural organization.

345. Some important CPC-affiliated leaders, such as A.E. Smith of the Canadian Labour Defence League, did recognize its usefulness and welcomed the contributions of Progressive Arts Club members.

346. The work of the PAC has been discussed by James Doyle in Progressive Heritage: the Evolution of a Politically Radical Literary Tradition in Canada (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2002) and by Robin Endres in the “Introduction” to Richard Wright and Robin Endres, eds., Eight Men Speak and Other Plays from the Canadian Workers’ Theatre (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1976). First-hand accounts are provided by Dorothy Livesay in Right Hand, Left Hand (Erin: Press Porcepic, 1977) and by Toby and Oscar Ryan in Toby Gordon Ryan, Stage Left: Canadian Theatre in the Thirties (Toronto: CTR Publications, 1981). Despite their knowledge of the organization and the movement it represented, participants have focused on the story of the PAC and its highlights, with little analysis of what the mass organization did and how its work fit in to the larger political movement. With the notable exceptions of the works of Alan Filewod and Bonita Bray, there has been little critical discussion of the involvement of the PAC in the CPC’s work and the impact of the PAC itself on the movement. See Alan Filewod, "'A Qualified Workers Theatre Art:' Waiting for Lefty and the
Where it is even mentioned in CPC member memoirs, the PAC’s origins have been obscured. It has been described as beginning in 1929, in 1931 and in 1932, being started by worker artists, by workers interested in the arts, and by names that subsequently became well known in Canadian culture. Its origin as a front or mass organization affiliated with the CPC has been consistently downplayed. An announcement on 26 December 1931 in the *Worker* provides the most credible indication of its birth. In this “Maurice Granite” (i.e. Oscar Ryan) asks, “Is it a fact that your workers’ movement in Canada suffers greatly from lack of cultural and artistic life, which makes it dull and unattractive to the masses?” He argued for opening a cultural front in working-class politics. The suppression of workers’ creativity in capitalism kept them from developing the critical self and collective consciousness necessary to revolution. Ryan acknowledged the cultural work of national groups, such as the Ukrainian and Finnish, but criticized them because “the content of their cultural activities is largely traditional and has little to do with the Canadian lives of the younger generation brought up on Canadian soil.”

The YCL was attempting to shift the communist movement in Canada away from such European radical traditions, and to re-center it on the leadership of the CPC. Ryan’s notice was directed to working-class youth, exhorting them to build a specifically Canadian revolutionary movement. Early in 1932 membership expanded as students, young artists and workers were drawn to the group, and meetings were shifted to Settlement House, behind the Art Gallery of Ontario. In April of 1932 a notice in

---


the *Young Worker* announced the appearance of a new magazine, “MASSES,” the “First Canadian Proletarian Art Monthly.”

A mixture of students and young workers, many of them YCL members, joined the PAC. Divided into two main sections, a dramatic group and a writers’ group, the PAC was mandated to produce agitational propaganda that explained and dramatized the CPC’s objectives. PACs were organized in cities throughout Canada, but the Toronto group was the biggest, most organized, and most influential. No doubt this was due in part to the convergence within it of such individuals as Oscar Ryan, Frank Love, Avrom Yanovsky, Ed Cecil-Smith, Toby Gordon, Jean Watts, Stanley Ryerson, Dorothy Livesay, and William Lawson. It was also due to their proximity to CPC headquarters and to the printing resources available to the Party.

For a short time and alongside the Canadian Labor Defence League, the PAC actually represented the public face of the Communist movement in Canada. When in November 1931 the CPC was legally banned and eight leading CPC leaders were imprisoned under Section 98, the club’s public work – short dramas, journalism, cultural criticism, cartoons, painting, and mass recitations – ensured that the Party, despite its illegal status, continued to be a presence in the public sphere. Regular members’ activities in party cells continued, and in some cases increased under the ban, while the PAC ensured that the Party’s message continued to reach beyond the CPC membership.

How influential was the PAC’s work? How was it received and by whom? Often, much of the audience for the short plays and mass chants performed by members of the Workers’ Experimental Theatre were other members of the PAC. Yet, on other occasions, such performances could reach a larger audience. Winnipeg Activist Fred Narvey recalled attending a PAC performance directed by Joe Zuken

---

348 “Read and Subscribe to “MASSES.” *Young Worker*, 14 April 1932. This confounds David Arnason’s account of the magazine, which conveys the impression that it began only with the return of Livesay and Ryerson to Toronto in June, 1932.
(later to become a widely respected Winnipeg alderman). “Every rehearsal was like a demonstration of solidarity,” he remembered. After a Winnipeg performance of *Eight Men Speak* was banned by City Hall, the dispute generated “more discussion and sympathy for us than we could possibly have achieved with a play that was written, with the best of intentions, by a committee, and acted by a group of under-rehearsed amateurs.” As he suggests, and much other evidence confirms, the severity of state repression created a particular climate in 1931-4 in which many people who might normally have distanced themselves from the CPC came to see it as the left’s leading force, up against a detested government.

The PACs were an important venue for reaching workers. Unscheduled performances at factories and on the street augmented the Party’s united front from below strategy of infiltrating social democratic organizations to swing members’ support to the Party. PAC members likened themselves to soldiers in the building of a workers’ culture. Along with the Canadian Labour Defence League, the PAC was essential to this transformation. The PAC’s work was often unpolished, but this was viewed as a virtue and a testament to its proletarian virility. PAC performances mainly aimed to denounce capitalism and bourgeois culture, and traded in vivid stereotypes. In the Third Period, as much as the bloated, top-hatted capitalist was the enemy, so too was the social democrat, accused of working to split the working class movement and drain away its lifeblood in sterile parliamentary debates.

Yet despite their political alignment with the working class, many PAC members had little knowledge of working-class life. This ensured that an odd tension persisted in the PAC’s work between its expressive and didactic functions. Members sought out and celebrated “genuine” producers of proletarian culture (who were then celebrated as “worker-writers” and “worker-artists”) but they never fully ironed out

---

the relation between proletarian culture and the leadership of the Communist Party. Some, especially such middle-class members as Dorothy Livesay, were themselves actually unsure about the cultural value of some forms of agitprop. In keeping with the view of the Party as the embodiment of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the PAC envisioned workers’ culture not so much as an unmediated reflection of the Canadian working class, but rather as the conscious, political creation of the Communist Party, the Bolshevik leadership. As was the case throughout the Third Period, class identity was not so much described as ascribed. Not surprising, in many issues of *Masses*, the journal the PAC began to publish in April of 1932, the question of art and propaganda, and the relation between art and class, was a predominant theme.

As class-conscious artists and writers PAC members identified themselves as the revolutionary cultural vanguard. They conceived of themselves and their movement as being identical with the Canadian working class. For PAC members this way of understanding their relation to the working class resolved the question of how mostly young, often middle-class individuals fit in to the movement. Articles in *Masses* warned that workers would shun art and writing that bore the imprint of bourgeois influence. Yet as articles and self-criticisms so often published in *Masses* demonstrated, many of the members of the PAC had difficulty overcoming bourgeois habits. In an atmosphere of uncertainty about what proletarian art actually looked or sounded like, few authors ventured to make contributions they claimed to be proletarian art. Rather, they called repeatedly for it. Middle-class members worked to shed their class identity by going on the offensive against bourgeois culture in reviews and essays. Much of the material published in *Masses* was expositive criticism and cultural analysis. It did not culminate in a consensus about what proletarian art actually was. The “cultural front” in Third Period did not mean the creation of a

350 See Livesay, *RHLH* 74.
cultural space in which various class and ethnic cultures met and exchanged their insights; it meant, instead, that middle-class recruits were expected to help create a class culture antithetical to the one in which they had been reared. Paradoxically enough, such middle-class recruits were expected to internalize, and promulgate, a class-against-class sensibility. In the PAC the question of art was synonymous with the question of class, and members struggled, in the pages of *Masses*, with the question of art versus propaganda.

***

Although in terms of political and cultural impact in Canada, the achievements of the Third Period cultural front were meager, two exceptions should be noted: *Masses* magazine and the play *Eight Men Speak*. *Masses* magazine has not had a fair hearing in many books and studies of the Party or of the 1930s. Seen as the Communist counter to the *Canadian Forum*, the magazine’s *bête noire*, it has never received a fraction of the attention lavished on the latter. It is admittedly a publication suffused with the ideas and imperatives of the Third Period, which sometimes make it difficult for a contemporary reader to appreciate the often subtle and original arguments it put forward about how to transform Canadian culture.

*Masses* first came out in April, 1932, with Oscar Ryan, founding member of the PAC and publicity director of the CLDL, playing a leading role. It would last until April, 1934, and on its own estimation overtook the circulation of the *Canadian Forum*, which it identified as its competitor on the cultural scene. ³⁵¹ Through *Masses*, its organizers predicted, “the cultural movement of the Canadian working class will be greatly strengthened.” ³⁵² Although its search for the proletarian aesthetic did not

---

culminate in an approach that moved millions, *Masses* provides a fascinating glimpse into the cultural world of the CPC and its supporters in the Third Period.

The atmosphere of *Masses* was apocalyptic. In every issue, the journal denounced, often in the most fiery language, capitalism as a system and the bourgeoisie as its beneficiary. Art should offer no prospect of refuge from the rigours of the class struggle, no repose from the battle against bourgeois dominance. Accordingly, the effort to weed out the influence of bourgeois sentimentalism and utopianism within the PAC itself and amongst contributors to *Masses* entailed an urgent and apparently endless campaign. From its first issue *Masses* targeted petit-bourgeois artists. The artist and intellectual who aligned himself or herself with the working-class movement would be redeemed only through his or her involvement in the emerging workers’ culture. In every aspect of their work, PAC members were to be guided by the principles of proletarian solidarity as they did their work in the midst of class war. *Masses* had little room for temporizers: socialist reformers like J.S. Woodsworth were considered dangerous reactionaries and attacked with Third Period rigour as vituperatively as R.B. Bennett himself.

In the very first editorial of *Masses*, Oscar Ryan condemned bourgeois intellectuals and artists for their “puerile ignorance of and contempt for social questions.” Such satiated individuals could not even muster the energy to rise from the “pink cushions of bohemia.”353 As an article on “Red Theatre” proclaimed in June 1932, the literature of the bourgeoisie was designed to ensure the continuing exploitation of the workers:

> Throughout the expanding stages of bourgeois domination right down to the final epoch of financial imperialism, literature, and all other cultural agencies, have paved the way for the domination of the workers by the exploiting class, by disseminating a vigorous propaganda that served to mislead the dispossessed into thinking

---

that their interests were identified with those of the vampire class that maintained them in a state of slavery.\footnote{360}

*Masses* editorials emphasized the importance of overcoming middle-class illusions within the PAC and to establishing a correct class orientation among PAC members. Bourgeois culture was effeminate, sterile and decadent -- all the more so in Canada, with its sad history of subordination to the British Empire. Rather than retreat to bohemian enclaves or rural isolation, the “only way out for Canadian artists who realize this predicament” is to turn to “the revolutionary possibilities of art already on the upsurge with the growing strength of the working class.”\footnote{361}

If capitalism, the bourgeoisie, and mainstream Canadian culture were all to be rejected in *Masses*, the magazine was clear about what could be affirmed: the Soviet Union as the model of a new form of culture; the working class and its emergent culture, as it was being developed by figures aligned with the Communist movement; and Canada itself, which despite its long cultural drought, held the potential to become the site of a great cultural movement. *Masses* shared the CPC commitment to a down-the-line defence of the Soviet Union and to support of its international objectives (trade, peace, security). For PAC militants the survival of Soviet socialism was pivotal to the possible growth of its Canadian counterpart.

For *Masses*, as for CPC members, fascism represented the inevitable decline of the bourgeois state into tyranny, while socialism represented the progressive development beyond bourgeois capitalism into communism. One article, outlining a “Brief History of Canadian Art,” after eviscerating the sterility and futility of virtually all previous artistic traditions in Canada, turned to the alternative world rising in the East: “What then are the characteristics of proletarian art? Why and where is it taking place? This article can only point out that as capitalism the world

\footnote{360 “Red Theatre,” *Masses*, June 1932, n.p.}
\footnote{361 D.L. and C.R.P., “Brief History of Canadian Art,” *Masses*, May-June, 1933, 9.}
over is falling away before the growth of the proletariat, so art too is everywhere decadent, except where it lies in revolutionary hands – in the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{362} In 1932 the model for the cultural rebirth of Canada lay in the Soviet Union. The November issue of \textit{Masses} celebrated the fifteenth anniversary of Bolshevik power in the Soviet Union, and praised Soviet workers whose example established “that we, the workers, are better able to plan and carry through the economics of mankind than the anarchic capitalists.”\textsuperscript{363}

Members of the PAC contrasted Soviet socialism to the cultural retreat accompanying the “decay and fascisization of capitalism.” They saw cultural work as an important means of kindling the revolutionary spirit of socialism in Canada. Socialist culture was full of life, whereas capitalist culture was decadent and deathly. In contrast to a bourgeois culture organized into strictly superintended specialties, academies, and professions, “[t]he creators of this [Soviet] culture are the workers, who are revolutionaries first. Because of this, they are forced to build their culture on solid ground, with its foundations in the daily social and economic life of their class. Because of this, the new culture has a virility and contact with life, forever denied the culture of capitalism in decay.”\textsuperscript{364}

\textit{Masses} reported on political and cultural developments in the Soviet Union and many articles, regardless of their ostensible topic, reiterated the importance of defending the Socialist fatherland. The November 1932 \textit{Masses} carried an appeal by a Soviet author, Vera Ubner, asking Western intellectuals to support her country in their work. Ubner stated that support for socialism was synonymous with support for the Soviet Union. The socialist homeland was vulnerable, Ubner wrote, because “[w]e are talking in Moscow, but we are heard by the whole world.”\textsuperscript{365} And so, she continued, “we must hear your voice in our defense. In common with us you must

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{362} “Brief History of Canadian Art,” 9.
\item \textsuperscript{363} “Fifteen Years U.S.S.R.,” \textit{Masses}, Vol. 1, No. 6, November, 1932, n.p.
\item \textsuperscript{364} “Fifteen Years U.S.S.R.”
\item \textsuperscript{365} Vera Ubner, “We Want To Hear Your Voice,” \textit{Masses}, November 1932, n.p.
\end{itemize}
say your word in defense of the U.S.S.R. and fight in our ranks for the socialist fatherland of the workers of the world.” She issued her clarion call to all intellectuals, every friend of the Soviet Union. The imagined universality of the potential audience contrasted with the narrowness of the all-or-nothing support requested of Soviet “friends.” There was no way to position oneself in this cultural landscape except according to the agenda laid out by the CPC — one that, in the Third Period, demanded the endorsement of proletarian culture and the dismantling of its bourgeois antithesis.

PAC members held different and sometimes contradictory views of proletarian culture and the question of propaganda versus art, but all endorsed the necessity of class struggle and the role of art within it. The most burning issue was often not what a given artist had created, or a given writer produced, but with which class he (and it is always a ‘he’) was aligned. A genuine proletkult atmosphere enveloped the early issues of the Masses — one, interestingly, that was increasingly out of step with the evolving cultural policies of the Soviet Union itself. This became evident in the March-April 1933 issue, in which Jack Lind explored “A Significant Turn in Soviet Literature.” This was a belated report on the dissolution of the Association of Proletarian Writers (RAAP), the first official sanction against Soviet proletkult organizations and the beginning of the transition to socialist realism. As opposed to what Lind described as the sectarian efforts of the RAAP to establish proletarian literature in the Soviet Union, the successes of socialist construction in industry and culture had brought “all honest but hitherto hesitant intellectuals to the cause of socialist construction. A new era opened in the relationship between the working class and the old intelligentsia: a new era in Soviet literature.” Because the fight for proletarian literature had been won in the Soviet Union, proletkult was now

366 Ibid.
367 Socialist realism was affirmed as the official mode of Soviet art and literature at the 1934 Soviet Writers’ Congress.
redundant. Rather like the CPC commentators on the later turn towards more conservative family values in the Soviet Union, Lind felt obliged to counter interpretations of the new cultural policy that saw it as a turning away from the revolution. Socialist construction had won the day and rallied all Soviet citizens (even the doubters) to the tasks of building socialism in every aspect of Soviet society. In Canada, a very different balance of class forces prevailed, in which bourgeois literature kept a death’s grip on working class creativity and Canadian culture as a whole. Everywhere, “bourgeois literature presents a picture of advanced decay, while proletarian literature in the Soviet Union, and some capitalist countries, is achieving ever higher degrees of artistic perfection.” Nothing of the sort could be said for Canada, “culturally, an extremely backward country,” or its writers, who had yet produced very little and much of it “literary trash.” According to Lind, in the Soviet Union it was no longer necessary actively to foster the development of proletarian literature, whereas in Canada proletarian literature remained in its infancy.

Articles in the Canadian *Masses* throughout 1933 and until the final March-April issue in 1934 reflected Soviet debates on art and culture. PAC members in Canada were preoccupied by the relation between proletarian art and the person producing it – that is, on the ability of intellectuals and artists who were not *from* the working class to make art *of* the working class. Central to these discussions was the view that rather than luxuriating in an isolated independence of society, the artist had a responsibility to depict the historical agency of the proletariat. In posing these questions the editors of *Masses* drew connections between cultural work and political struggle, and re-defined culture for their readership as a terrain of class struggle and as an essential part of the labour movement.

Many of the better-known contributors to *Masses* (such as E. Cecil-Smith, Oscar Ryan, Lon Lawson and Stanley Ryerson) based their work on close readings of Marx, Engels, and Lenin. Their contributions to the cultural front were grounded in
their own intellectual practice, and informed by issues and initiatives originating in the CPSU and the CI. The turning point came with Stalin’s endorsement of socialist realism as the form of proletarian art at the First Congress of Soviet Writers in August 1934, which resulted in endless poems, paintings and other cultural works depicting a wholly positive and heroic image of Soviet socialism and increasingly of Stalin himself. Yet what was increasingly a matter of aesthetic dogma in Moscow remained a somewhat open question in Canada. PAC activists sought to stimulate workers’ interest and provoke their involvement in making art that would challenge bourgeois culture, but they did not propound a rigid conception of how this should be carried out. In a way, they kept something of the experimental spirit of proletkult alive. Their imagined proletarian culture was not altogether compatible with the new orthodoxies of socialist realism. Overall, the juxtaposition of the “dead” culture of the bourgeois past and the “live” culture of the proletarian future left the status of cultural work in the present day in a state of uncertainty.

*Masses* hoped to reach beyond its established circle of contributors “to include dozens more from among you who work in the industries, slave camps, mines and farms of Canada,” thus making sure that the magazine would “be close to the daily struggles.” Masses dreamt in particular of a new group of working-class intellectuals, “real” artists and writers Ryan contrasted with the effete bourgeois intellectuals. These working-class men and women held no positions of power and ease in bourgeois society because they were tuned to the pulse and movement of real life, the life of Canadian workers. Such an insurgent working class would demand a revolutionary culture, one that would expand with the growing realization of its

---

369 Ryan in “Our Credentials” says the first PAC, made up of 35 members, was formed in Toronto in Fall, 1931. David Arnason and Dorothy Livesay (*RHLH*, 3) give the founding year as 1932. The first estimate is more reliable. It renders unlikely accounts that make both Livesay and Stanley Ryerson founding members of PAC, since they were in Paris in the Fall of 1931. It is also suggestive that many accounts fail to mention Jim Watts at all, who was in fact a central figure in the proletarian theatre movement and would have been as familiar a name to contemporaries as such better-celebrated luminaries as Oscar Ryan.
needs and the methods necessary to their fulfillment. “They must have songs that will stir them emotionally, that will awaken a response in their own subjective sufferings and lead them on to revolt,” Andrew Gillespie Cowan proclaimed. “They must have plays that will depict the drabness and sorrow of their daily lives and resolve the doubts and fears that arise in the minds of the individuals as a result of these apparently hopeless contradictions and frustrations into a clarified determination to assert their own strength as a class. In teaching the workers the ways and means by which they can achieve their social salvation the theatre must take its place with the soapbox and working class press.”

In the May-June 1933 issue, *Masses* editors asked for readers’ response to the “top-heavy” content of the issue, because “[q]uite unavoidably considerably more theoretical material was included than in previous issues.” The PAC had published stories by the proletarian author Dan Faro, and repeated in each issue that not only were there many authors and writers amongst the working class, but there was also a large working-class audience anxious to receive their work. The editors were trying to make the point that the preponderance of theoretical essays in a journal devoted to proletarian culture was not because of a lack of proletarian literature, but of the importance members attached to working out its meanings, principles, and forms.

Only such a vibrant and combative culture could regenerate Canada, *Masses* urged. Articles on poetry, art, theatre and literature in Canada were composed on similar lines with similar themes: death versus life, perversion versus virility, decadence versus growth, openness versus dissimulation. However stunted and bleak the Canadian cultural terrain might be, it nonetheless offered fertile soil for the growth of proletarian culture, “the deepening economic crisis, growing political crisis, mass misery, mass disillusionment, mass struggle, and the ideological decay in the bourgeoisie itself constitutes the starting point for a proletarian literature in

---

Canada.” At this moment in Canada’s political and cultural development, when the tides of history were turning against bourgeois culture, *Masses* urged every future-oriented progressive intellectual and artist to align with the working class. In his article on literary developments in the Soviet Union, Jack Lind stressed the importance of the Toronto journal in the context of the revolutionary situation: “*Masses* expresses the conscious effort to do what the objective situation dictates. Far from renouncing its role as pioneer of proletarian literature on Canadian soil, it must continue to fulfill it more and better. It must draw proletarians into the literary field (some successes can be registered already) without at the same time relinquishing the task of winning over every sincere Canadian writer to the cause of the proletariat.”372 By sincerity, the editors invoked the ideal of an unalloyed workerism, the possibility of a proletarian culture entirely free of bourgeois influence. This would prove to be a contentious basis for cultural authority amongst the editors and contributors to *Masses*.

In another article on the historical development of Canadian art, two authors, one of them identified as “D.L,” presumably Dorothy Livesay, posed the question: “Why is Canadian art so flat, so dull, so meaningless to the great mass of the people?”373 The article places art in Canada in the context of historical class relations, then offers commentary and criticism of the present cultural impasse, caused by the decline of bourgeois culture and the vitality of the emerging proletarian nemesis. It ends with a hand extended to all “sincere supporters of the workers.” The propaganda-vs.-art debate is reconfigured here as one pitting meaningful, revolutionary content against lifeless, futile form. For these writers, the art of the Canadian bourgeoisie, because it is “cut off from life,” had “nothing further to endure but the slow dying.”374

373 “Brief History of Canadian Art,” 8.
374 Ibid., 9.
Canadian artists and writers such as the Group of Seven were criticized in *Masses* not on the basis of their technical practice but because they clung to an outmoded concept of art as something located above the fray of social and political struggle. For PAC members, culture was both a field of conflict and the means of class battle. The artist who did not actively oppose bourgeois culture was against the working class. There was no neutral ground, no disinterested art. *Masses* sought to provoke debate on the significance of culture and to focus attention on the role of the artist in political struggle. The final page of the November, 1932 issue illustrated what was at stake in cultural work:

**WRITERS! ARTISTS!**

In view of the confusion produced by the economic crisis, in the political as well as in the cultural life of Canada, MASSES and the PROGRESSIVE ARTS CLUBS ask you the following questions:

What role should the artist play in Canadian life?

Do you think that Canadian culture, as represented by the Canadian artists (Group of Seven) writers (Canadian Forum, etc.) depict the Canadian whole scene?

What role has this culture (as approved by the church officials of the Bennett Government) played in suppressing the struggles of the working class?

What role did the Canadian artist play in the Great war?

What are you going to do in the coming imperialist war against the SOVIET UNION?

Do you believe that Canadian Capitalism can suppress working class organizations by applying fascist terrorism, by deporting foreign-born workers, jailing revolutionary working class leaders and murdering workers (Estevan -- Jaaski in Port Arthur)?

In what way do these events concern the Canadian writers and artists?

What can the writer and artist do in the campaign for the release of the eight working class leaders in Kingston?
Articles dealing with all of these point will appear in subsequent issues of “MASSES.”

This apocalyptic atmosphere, in which readers confronted a world of stark, black-or-white choices, was characteristic of *Masses*. In many ways it was applying to Canadian cultural questions the axioms of the Third Period. One author emphasized the Third Period thesis that capitalism had entered its final crisis: “It is incapable of further progress; it has exhausted the possibilities of exploitation. It seeks to keep itself alive with hypodermic injections – all at the expense of the workers, of course. Its apologists are bankrupt of further cultural ammunition with which to defend its position.” This theme of life-or-death choices suffused the discussion of aesthetics in *Masses*. In such an age, one writer argued, bourgeois conventions of stage craft were superfluous.

An audience whose social needs form the necessary background to a graphic stage presentation supply for the most part their own mental stage scenery. Theirs is the theatre of ideas. They do not need exotic costumes, elaborate sets and inanely beautiful women to pander to any emptiness in their mental equipment with sentimentality and aphrodisiacal display. They require only a living delineation and articulation of the sufferings that an oppressive class is heaping upon them.

In the world imagined by *Masses*, no responsible playwright, artist or writer could stand aloof from the imperative to bring the truth to a rising working class.

Contributors to *Masses* were united in their pro-Soviet, pro-working-class stance, but did not fully agree with each other on what this stance entailed. In general, there was an acute tension between the empirical exposition of Canadian realities and the sophisticated analytical frameworks some writers in *Masses* brought to bear upon them. There was an openness to debating difficult issues in *The Masses*, a tone increasingly out of step with the often repetitive and homogeneous quality of life.

---

376 *Masses*, 1, 6 (November 1932), back page.
377 Ibid.
other CPC publications. It was a telling indication of the age that well-regarded debaters in the publication, such as Cecil-Smith and Ryerson, would refer favourably to thinkers such as Bukharin and Radek, both shortly to perish in Stalin’s terror.

In the July-August 1932 issue, and for some thereafter, the movement’s partisans debated the status of art with respect to propaganda. “Maurice Granite” -- in actuality, Oscar Ryan -- as well as Edward Cecil-Smith and the lesser-known T. Richardson, took up cudgels in such articles as “In Defence of Pure Art” (Richardson) and “What is Pure Art?” (Cecil-Smith). The ongoing debate on socialist realism in the Soviet Union fueled uncertainty amongst Canadian PAC members and even, it was said, kept some from producing work. In an article titled “Propaganda and Art” in the January 1933 Masses, Ed Cecil-Smith responded to criticisms of the Workers’ Theatre productions. Drawing on the work of Soviet authors Bukharin and Lunacharsky, Cecil-Smith argued that art’s relation to political change resided in the dialectical process through which cultural expression engendered political consciousness and action. In the following issue, Stanley Ryerson took issue with Cecil-Smith’s emphasis on art as a means of expressing the class position from which it emerges. About Cecil-Smith’s main points, Ryerson pronounced “This last is simply bunk. The one before is merely wrong, and the first one, just a mistake.” Ryerson (who used only his initials here) criticizes Cecil-Smith’s analysis because, he argues, it

justifies the outlook of the bourgeoisie as a “natural” expression of its class feelings, side by side with the expressions of other classes, including the proletariat. The difference he finds in the degree of truthfulness and realism of the respective outlooks, not in irreducible antagonism of classes engaged in a struggle leading to the annihilation of one by the other.

---

378 By 1936 both of these authors were out of favour with Stalin and the CPSU. Lunacharsky died in 1933 and his work was repudiated during the Great Terror. Bukharin was convicted of conspiracy and executed in 1938.
The effect of this line of argument, Ryerson explains, is that the differences between bourgeois and proletarian art are posed as “simply one of relative degrees of understanding and ‘realism,’ instead of posing it as a question of the class struggle [which] is to abandon the fundamental positions of Marxism and to mislead everybody.” Ryerson goes on to note that the question of style and technique -- dynamic or dialectical realism versus romantic realism -- was not the deciding factor, because “the essence of the matter is the class orientation of the artist.” Ryerson ends his criticism of Cecil-Smith’s attempt to clarify the politics versus art debate with the assertion that proletarian art and literature “must be judged entirely as an expression -- from the technical and political viewpoints -- of the proletarian class struggle for the socialist revolution.”\(^{379}\) Cecil-Smith’s response appeared in the same issue. His essay had concluded with the need for attention to technical skill and development in proletarian art. Cecil-Smith was a good writer, and a better dramatist than Ryerson. He defended his views against Ryerson’s excoriating assessment and pointed out inconsistencies in Ryerson’s indictment. Most importantly, however, Cecil-Smith criticized Ryerson’s assertion of theoretico-cultural authority, and noted that rather than ending the debate and lining up behind any position, including Ryerson’s, CPC members and the readers of *Masses* needed more discussion on this important issue.\(^{380}\)

Ryerson was a relatively new member of the CPC, but he had been quickly elevated to the CPC’s leadership ranks. His recognition within the Party as a highly gifted and promising intellectual may have shortened his patience in discussions of aesthetic form and the practice of art, and sharpened the tone in which he dismantled Cecil-Smith’s argument. Ryerson’s reproach asserted a highly sectarian and dogmatic position on proletarian culture and cultural work, a strict reading in


which the “program and fighting policy of the class struggle” determined the meaning of art.

The differences expressed between these two key participants in the Canadian debate on proletarian culture were also having an effect on the CPC and the PAC in 1933 and 1934. Cecil-Smith was a central figure in the party’s cultural work, and had co-written *Eight Men Speak*, the most sophisticated and effective proletarian work to date. One point he made in his response to Ryerson was to note that his ultra-sectarian line would stifle future work:

> Not only will we never build any Marxist esthetic theory in Canada by denying the importance of “more delicate and complex psychic experiences”; but the narrow and sectarian line in this regard, as laid down by S.R., has a very retarding effect on such artists as are drawn into the class struggle.

> We have ample proof of this, both in Montreal and Toronto, where artists and writers coming under this influence actually tend to cease to produce. This is a fact drawn from life and must be faced.381

Ryerson’s final response to Cecil-Smith on art and propaganda, “Out of the Frying Pan,” illustrates the close attention he paid to Soviet Party leadership on politics and art. He quotes from Karl Radek (later tried for treason in 1937): “The new relationships in the Soviet Union are coming into being through bitter struggle, at the cost of the greatest sacrifices, and for this reason the new order of society demands realism in art.” Ryerson endorsed Radek’s focus on the political implications of cultural representation, and argued that the problems generated by the art-versus-propaganda debate could be traced to errors of definition and misunderstandings concerning the relation between communism and art. Ryerson’s contribution was to clarify the debate by focusing on the centrality of class in cultural work. The essential difference between art and propaganda lay in the class orientation of the work: the progressive quality of socialist art and the advantage

381 Ibid.
possessed by the class-conscious artist consisted of “the superiority born of his position as a conscious fighter for the overthrow of capitalism.” The “essence of the matter is the class orientation of the artist.” The effect of his contribution was to set the debate back on class terms and foreclose the search for universalist meaning in art. His position reflected the continued predominance of a radical class politics within the Party leadership. The debate also indicated the considerable intellectual elbow room within the Party. Ryerson’s 1934 articles in *Masses* represent a transitional point in the debate on the involvement of intellectuals with the CPC.

When *Masses* began in 1932 its editorials and articles reflected the uncertain status of intellectuals and intellectualism in the Party. Intellectuals were useful insofar (and only) as they clarified and strengthened the case for working-class struggle and socialism. Ryerson’s writing in *Masses*, particularly his contributions to the art versus propaganda debate, fulfilled this conception of the intellectual’s role in the Party. His authority was derived from his intellectually adroit expression of the working-class position. It also seemed to impel him to shut down a debate that Cecil-Smith thought was an important one for the movement.

In the March-April 1933 issue of *Masses*, Cecil-Smith had contributed an article on Karl Marx. Titled “Marx Belongs To Us!”, it was intended to show the continuing relevance of Marx’s theoretical legacy and to dispute any social democratic claims to it. Cecil-Smith gives a compelling account of the importance of culture to revolutionary politics, cautioning readers that “we must not forget that Marx’s great heritage is a cultural one. Marxism itself is a cultural patrimony of the highest kind.” Against mechanistic views emphasizing the structural economic causes of revolution, Cecil-Smith pointed out that “[n]either Marx nor the leading Marxists have ever ignored the part played by revolutionary culture in the dialectic process of history. Neither have they considered the arts themselves to be outside

---

the realm of dialectics.” Cecil-Smith criticized the disinterest in the cultural front among the CPC leadership, arguing that to ignore culture “is certainly not Marxian. That there exists a body of such opinion, not altogether confined to the rank and file, in the working class movement of Canada, is certainly not a healthy sign.”

Perhaps the Cecil-Smith/Ryerson debate had been promoted in part because of this earlier, surprisingly frank critique of the Party’s somewhat mechanical Third Period positions on cultural life.

As Cecil-Smith had implied, relatively few workers were actively making proletarian culture and middle-class members of the PAC were on unfamiliar ground. Members questioned whether their alignment with the working class was a sufficient basis for their efforts to embody the working class in literature and the arts. How could they convey working-class life honestly and effectively if they lived apart from it? A good number of the authors and artists whose work appeared in *Masses* were not proletarian themselves. While the need for art produced by workers was continuously raised, actual proletarian *origins* were less important than proletarian *aspirations* – that is, one’s sincere desire to serve the working class and give voice to its demands.

It is possible to see in *Masses* indications of the CPC’s later shift towards the Popular Front, and discern some of the domestic reasons why this change would have seemed advisable to some PAC militants. When *Masses* began publication in the spring of 1932, its had a distinctly *proletkult* flavour. A year of publication brought significant changes. Its partisans strenuously debated, often at a high level of sophistication, the nuances and complexities of the project of developing a proletarian culture in Canada. *Masses* offered members a venue in which to develop

---

383 E. Cecil-Smith, “Marx Belongs To Us!”, *Masses*, (March-April, 1933). Cecil-Smith’s defence of the importance of culture in the political practice of class struggle was not representative of the CPC in general, nor of its leadership. His argument actually indicates the absence of a solid consensus on the role of art in revolution, and also indicates that he was an early proponent of the popular front emphasis on culture as politically dynamic.

384 Oscar Ryan and Dan Faro were the closest the PAC ever came to proletarian writers. Ryan worked more than full time for the CPC, and Faro was the genuine article, a “worker-writer.”
their ideas about art and class politics, and to defend and criticize others’ opinions as they saw fit. Over time, it focused more and more on challenging the middle class. *Masses* attacked the allure of such counter-cultural impulses as bohemianism and the back-to-the-land movement. Such palliatives merely evaded the central problem of class conflict and so delayed the process of moving beyond capitalism to socialism. Because of their involvement and investment in culture, members of the middle (or petty bourgeois) class were most susceptible to such utopian impulses.

Interestingly, *Masses* did not follow other leftists in disdaining the middle class as a negligible, waning political force. Rather, it was of the greatest significance. “When the class as a whole begins to be threatened with destruction, the petty bourgeoisie, which gives rise to the largest number of artists, has only two remedies: either to attempt to supplant nature by some mystic world, with pessimism or some religious consolation; or to abandon the bourgeois world altogether, with complete sincerity and a full desire to regenerate, joining the class to which the real future belongs.”

In line with this interest in the middle class, the May-June 1933 issue of *Masses* began a series of unsigned articles analyzing the class culture and politics of its closest competitor, *The Canadian Forum*. Why was it important for the editors of *Masses* to offer a critical assessment of its competition, which it described as “for a long time the only literary and critical journal of any worth in Canada”?

The series was directed to exposing the class character and politics of *The Canadian Forum*, and encouraging its “more developed” readership and contributors to “come over to our side of the barricades.” The middle-class readers of the *Forum* needed to wake up to a world in which both the inner and outer contradictions of capitalism in Canada - - a crisis-ridden economic system and the rising force of imperialism - threatened

---

387 Ibid., 6.
their well-being. In the world of literature and the arts, it “becomes more and more impossible for writers to segregate themselves from the world in bohemia. They now are coming into the open and siding either with progress or reaction.” From the point of view of Masses, the Canadian Forum constituency needed to understand its historical context more clearly, and come to terms with the “breath taking tempo of events.” It needed to grasp the class politics of culture (as opposed to the cultural politics of class). The authors recognized that several Forum contributors, among them F.R. Scott, Eugene Forsey, J.F. White and Felix Walter, had accepted at least some of the basic propositions of scientific socialism and supported the Canadian working class. Whether they would, as petit-bourgeois intellectuals, ever accept the leadership of the proletariat remained doubtful. Their equivocation was dangerous in the context of the class struggle, because:

Liberalism today, even under CCF colors, is a strongly reactionary force, as its chief teaching is that there are always two sides to a question and that the real observer cannot take sides. Under the present system this attitude means only the strongest possible support to the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie…by the fact that it suggests no struggle against it.

A third article appeared in the January 1934 issue of Masses. It sought to contextualize Canadian Forum’s editorial board and contributors. They were described as petit-bourgeois intellectuals whose shared class motivation was “to express the ideas and to defend the interest of the Canadian petty bourgeoisie.” They were also, often, Canadian nationalists. Unlike Communists they had a faulty grasp of the country’s geo-historical position. When Canada was understood to be an imperial power in its own right (rather than a “colonial appendage of Great Britain”), then its own class struggles could be seen as the crucial ones determining the course of future Canadian development. The article described the political significance of

---

388 Ibid., 5.
389 Ibid., 7.
the petit-bourgeois class perspective of *The Canadian Forum*: “They are incapable of playing an independent part in this struggle and are essentially followers. Now they follow the bourgeoisie, now the workers, depending on which way the tide is flowing. Only by completely renouncing their blood relationship with the big bourgeoisie and definitely aligning themselves with the revolutionary workers, can this class of people adopt a progressive position. With a very few exceptions...the Forum contributors have failed to take this step.”

This debate was interesting, not only for its striking position with respect to Canadian nationalism, but also with regard to its characterization of the middle class, soon to be the object of particular CPC attention. Such articles reflected a shift, away from the sectarian emphases of Third Period policies and in Canada, the growing interest in recruiting middle-class professionals and intellectuals to the Party. One heard, sometimes implicitly and sometimes explicitly, arguments maintaining that the position of the petit bourgeoisie in the balance of class forces in Canada was of decisive significance.

Overall, *Masses* was not a financial success, and it cannot be reckoned as one of the major cultural forces shaping Depression-era Canada. As early as December, 1932 *Masses* was having difficulty paying its bills and went from (irregular) monthly to bi-monthly publication. The last issue of *Masses* appeared in March-April 1934. Generally ignored or discounted, *Masses* was more remarkable than has been commonly recognized. The journal has been seen as a mouthpiece for the CPC, rather than a venue for discussion and debate in a vibrant socialist movement whose members were trying to come to (their own) grip with issues of art and culture.

---

391 Ibid., 5.
392 Ironically, in the very month the journal closed, it was reviewed in the *Young Worker* as a thriving and important venue for proletarian culture. The reviewer, Paul Kelly, described the development of the PAC, from “a small and politically confused group of artists and writers” into “the leader of the struggles of the Canadian workers on the cultural front.” Proof of this process was in “the constant improvement of Masses, the current issue of which is the best to date.” Paul Kelly, Review of “Masses,” *Young Worker*, 2 April 1934, 7.
Downplaying its significance entrenches a presumption of the irrelevance—political and cultural—of the CPC and of radical socialism in Canada. This presumption must be challenged, for the sake of a fuller understanding of radical politics and culture in the Canadian past. The work published in *Masses* was certainly uneven, but it was sometimes brilliant and often compelling in its depictions of insecurity, poverty and waste. Contributors brought considerable literary, analytic and artistic skill to the discussion of proletarian culture and socialism in Canada. And one can discern in some of their positions the outlines of themes that would become far more pervasive in the era of the Popular Front.

Cultural work was the weapon young artists, writers and activists put to work in their critiques of capitalist society and bourgeois inequality. But members of the PAC placed and practised their cultural work in a much wider political context. As well as educating the audience to challenge class inequality, culture’s role was formative. It was the space into which the new world of socialism was projected, portrayed not only as possible but vitally necessary for the survival of humanity.

***

Besides *Masses*, the second great cultural contribution that the CPC-affiliated Progressive Arts Clubs made to the cultural life of the Canadian left was the Workers’ Theatre Movement. Like those who argued for new forms of fiction in *Masses*, proponents of workers’ theatre developed a clear line of what it was they were against. The case for proletarian theatre had been made in the first issue of *Masses* by David Hogg and by Andrew Gillespie in the third issue. Hogg used a metaphor of childhood and vitality to characterize the workers’ theatre: “[l]ike the child, the revolutionary workers movement on this continent is young and crude . . . All through its life throbs an eagerness and thirst for life which stands out in startling
contrast to the bitter cynicism, mysticism or sexual riot which characterizes the contemporary stage in its expression of life." Hogg argued that what was necessary to stir the workers theatre into action was not money, experience or accumulated knowledge, but just “a chance at birth. Help is needed, talent, ideas, plays, encouragement, informed constructive criticism.” Hogg closed with a request for input from workers, a line typical of the communist press: “Let’s hear from you.”

According to Robin Endres, “the height of the agitprop came roughly between April and December of 1933.” The proletarian theatre as a cultural movement in Canada announced itself with the introduction of a new feature in the May-June issue of *Masses*, “Workers’ Theatre.” This carried news of the Toronto group and readers’ correspondence detailing the formation of branches of the WT across the country (in reality from Montreal westward.) As well as local and national theatre news, *Masses* reported on the international scene.

From its formation in 1932, the theatre section of the PAC aimed at developing theatre as politics. Its slogan was “Theatre - Our Weapon.” Performances were not conceived as depictions of class struggle, but as part of class struggle. They were designed to break down the barrier between audience and actor, house and stage. The proletarian theatre sought to contextualize workers' lives within capitalism, to politicize the private conflict and drama in working-class homes. The desired impact of agitprop theatre was the enhancement of working-class solidarity and commitment to class struggle. The function of aesthetic form (unity of mass motion, syncopated movement) was to facilitate the delivery of this political message. Technique was extremely important in making the meaning of the play evident and in eliciting the audience’s engagement with the story being told in the performance.

---

394 Ibid.
395 Ibid., xiv-xv.
The first performance of the Workers’ Experimental Theatre took place at the Ukranian Labour Temple in Toronto on May 6, 1932. The short play, titled Deported, was reviewed in the June issue of Masses by Lon Lawson, a young member of the PAC. Lawson was a student at St. Michael's College, and one of the first of a number of University of Toronto students to contribute to Masses.396 He begins his review with an assertion: “The necessity of this organization [the WET] is too obvious to be expounded here.” Lawson noted deficiencies in the production: it started almost one hour late, two cast members were no-shows, the last minute substitutions were ill prepared, the play was poorly advertised. But he finished warmly: “the performance marked an encouraging departure from the polite whimsies of what, until now, has passed in Canada as a native theatre. We are looking forward to the next production of this group, and I think I speak for all proletarians in extending them a sincere welcome.”397 Common to every review and article on theatre in Masses was the view that a distinctly proletarian theatre in Canada was essential. Writers such as Hogg, Andrew Gillespie Cowan and Lawson mocked the “polite whimsies” of English theatre as one form of sterility, but the technical and commercial excesses of Hollywood and Broadway were condemned as more dangerous forms of the same barrenness.

Lawson’s review had stuck closely to the issues of script and stagecraft. In contrast, Cowan discussed proletarian theatre on a general level, in the context of the development of theatre historically. Cowan’s argument was carried as much by its colourful metaphors as its argument, with expressions such as “the vampire class”, “artistic apologists” and “vulgar patriotic jingo” pumping up his claims. More than fiction or art, revolutionary theatre was seen as the backbone of workers’ culture. The need for it was urgent because the theatre was itself a political forum. In

396 A article by Lawson titled “Babbity” appeared in the second issue of Masses. Judging from readers’ reaction in the letters section, the article was well-received. Unfortunately, this second issue was not included in the copied film of Masses, and no paper copies of the issue exist.
portraying working-class struggle, the theatre was key to bringing workers to consciousness of their condition and awareness of their collective role in history. Through seeing itself on the stage, the working class could objectify its struggles as social class conflict, rather than personal tragedy and strife. More treacherous than the bourgeois theatre of “polite whimsies” was the lure of Hollywood movies for working-class audiences: “Out of the desolate misery of filthy congested homes they wander vicariously in a lotus eaters paradise of so-called beautiful women and romantic men.” “Hollywood is the fountainhead of a subtle drug of sensuality,” Cowan exclaimed, “. . . the exotic excrescence of the depravities of an exploiting leisure class of social morons.”\(^{398}\) Cowan and Hogg were confident of their own ability to withstand these blandishments, but clearly they believed that workers needed guidance to avoid being fatally lured by Hollywood’s siren song.

Like so many other cultural initiatives praised by *Masses*, workers’ theatre was thus conceived as a weapon in the struggle. Yet, also like the other projects supported by the PAC and boosted by *Masses*, workers’ theatre in North America was ambiguously situated with respect to the new cultural politics of the Soviet Union. Much of this ambiguity can be seen in the first significant stirrings of the movement in New York City in the early 1930s. Theatre historian Wendy Smith has described how members of the Workers’ Laboratory Theatre (formed in 1931) broke away from the Workers’ International Relief Organization in 1933 in the name of greater artistic freedom. She argues that these “[p]erceptive theatrical leftists” had begun:

> to shape their productions to express a more general radicalism that reached out to all those disillusioned and frightened by the collapse of the American economic system. The party lagged behind its theatrical allies by more than two years; by the time the Seventh Comintern Congress declared a United Front Policy in August 1935, American workers theatres had long since dropped the schematic preachifying of traditional agitprop in favor of a style more closely

linked to American vaudeville than European drama, containing more human characters and leavened with some much-needed humour.  

However, since 1931 agitprop had been the object of criticism and discouragement in the Soviet Union, as Soviet socialist realism became the officially favoured mode of all cultural work. The Soviet “great break” with bourgeois culture in 1929-30 eliminated the challenges posed by “professional” (i.e. bourgeois) expertise to Soviet authority. After 1932 the Party re-established the relation between expertise and skill, training and recognition, but in terms it defined and controlled. Socialist realism in the Soviet Union reinforced the ideological and professional legitimacy of the bureaucratic state. However, socialist realism could not be simply exported. In Canada and the U.S. party-aligned cultural work was “realist,” but tended to be “socialist” in a critical rather than prescriptive form. The theatrical leftists were ahead of the CI’s formal shift to the Popular Front, but not without the Party’s blessing — they were the vanguard of the movement, testing and confirming the currents shaping the directions that the Party’s cultural work was taking. The Party was receptive to popular front cultural strategies before the official change in orientation in 1935.

In the U.S. the Theatre Collective was formed as an adjunct to the WLT in winter, 1933. At the time, the Group Theatre in New York City was defining a place for itself between Broadway and the cultural Left. The Theatre Collective offered classes in acting and directing in the fall of 1934, and introduced students to the Stanislavky method of acting. Over the winter of 1933, Group members Lee Strasberg lectured Theatre Collective students on directing and Clifford Odets instructed them in acting technique. Interaction between members of the Group Theatre and the Theatre Collective continued on a professional basis, providing amateurs and

novices at the Theatre Collective with training, and giving “Group members a sense of meaningful activity they desperately craved.”

Proletarian theatre received steady promotion as well as criticism in the pages of *Masses*. Cowan’s stringent warnings about the sort of theatre workers need amounted to a prescription of culture for workers:

They must have plays that will depict the drabness and sorrow of their daily lives and resolve the doubts and fears that arise in the minds of the individuals as a result of these apparently hopeless contradictions and frustrations into a clarified determination to assert their own strength as a class. In teaching the workers the ways and means by which they can achieve their social salvation the theatre must take its place with the soap box and working class press.

After *Deported*, the next WET performance to be reviewed in *Masses* was “Solidarity - Not Charity” presented at a Toronto benefit for the Workers’ International Relief. The anonymous reviewer reported “great improvement” in the group’s abilities, but criticized its effort at a mass recitation, in which

a motley, rather jagged effect was produced . . . The players, furthermore, did not move in rhythm. The gestures, the swaying of bodies in unison, the striking of symbolic poses, are as important as the lines, with which close unity is essential.

This critic closed with encouraging words: “Its third appearance before a Toronto worker audience has conclusively shown that it has the making of a valuable medium of working class education and amusement.” Readers and contributors to *Masses* clearly took the new theatre seriously. They gave it considerable attention. Throughout 1932 the WET continued to rehearse as it could and performed at mass meetings and benefits. Members had taken the critics’ criticisms to heart. By January, the WT was a fixture in Toronto’s labour movement.

---

400 Ibid., 127.
401 Andrew Gillespie Cowan “Red Theatre,” *Masses*, (June, 1932), n.p. The contrast between Lawson’s friendly review of the WET and Cowan's verbose indictment of bourgeois culture as opiate prefigures the different tones distinguishing *Masses* from the later CPC-aligned journal *New Frontier*.
403 Ibid.
The theatre section of the PAC contained more working-class members than the writers’ group. Coming up with effective agitprop was a constant struggle. It was clearly more appealing to perform proletarian drama than to write the scripts. The theatre section provided sociability, camaraderie and relief from the daily grind. It also offered members the chance to have some fun. One member of the Winnipeg PAC, with a predominantly working-class membership, recalled a particularly humorous twist on Party orthodoxy: “We called it a sign of maturity to be able to laugh at ourselves...I remember one skit where Frances Goffman came out completely wrapped in a long cape. She took her time, then dropped the cape to reveal herself dressed in a bikini, and said, ‘Workers of the world – tonight!’”

In 1934 Stanley Ryerson, one of the major polemicists in the Masses art-vs.-propaganda debate, wrote a short agit-prop play titled War In the East for the PAC’s drama section. Ryerson’s script dramatized the Japanese invasion and subsequent occupation of Manchuria in 1931. The Mikado (Japanese imperialism) is in conversation with an ailing Capitalism, a character with spats and a bulging belly, supported by Religion, characterized as a priest, and War, a general. Explaining why his efforts to dope peasants and workers no longer worked, Religion complains that: “As long as there were no free men on earth, except the exploiters, they believed me. But now there is a country where the workers have seized what does not belong to them, and made it their own. And all over the world the masses are turning to look at this thing and they will not listen to me. What can I do? You yourself are gouty and decrepit.” The Capitalist urges the Mikado to send the General to invade the Soviet Union. Priest, Capitalist, General and Mikado agree this is a splendid plan:

All Four: (bending forward with fists raised) Wipe out the Workers’ and Peasants’ Republic!

---

Capitalist: We will spread our tentacles out over the insolent Soviets, take back our factories and mines and forest, and trample the toilers under foot as we used to do - and then we will be safe! (sits back)
General and Priest: (straightening up) Safe!
Capitalist: Then let us begin. Come! (General and Priest support the Capitalist off the stage).406

Ryerson's play was intended to convey information about a real political situation and to tell viewers how they should respond. It was propaganda with no equivocation or apologies. For Ryerson, proletarian art was distinguished from bourgeois art not by the forms it embraced but by the propaganda function it filled — building the communist movement.

In the midst of writing and performing agitprop plays and chants, PAC members were attuned to debates in the Soviet Union and the United States on the need for a more sophisticated workers’ theatre.407 Jim Watts and Toby Gordon became the unofficial leaders of those pushing for a more highly developed workers’ theatre in Canada. Commentators on the international workers’ theatre movement agree that agitprop theatre was a casualty of the Popular Front Against Fascism. However, the move toward a stationary theatre that drew from the dramatic technique and style of bourgeois theatre was well underway before 1935, as early as 1932. In this sense, the Workers’ Theatre was anticipating the line change to the Popular Front. Its plays united their audiences behind progressivism, in part by staging conventional gender ideals as universal rather than historical and class-based. In its purest “agitprop” manifestation, the earliest forms of workers’ theatre were explicitly oppositional and excluded all bourgeois influence — they were akin to chants shouted in a demonstration. The later forms, more amenable to a stationary location, drew more fully upon notions of a “people’s art,” were rooted in

406 Ibid., 119
407 Introduction by Robin Endres, Ibid., xxx.
professional skill and training, and were implicitly political, in contrast to the explicit style and content of agitprop.

Mildred Goldberg, one of the authors of *Eight Men Speak*, gave the readers of *Masses* advice on how to set up a local section of the Workers’ Theatre. Her advice offers a glimpse of the practice and organization of the Toronto group. In “How to Form a Dramatic Group In Your District,” Goldberg noted that at least six members were needed, from whom a director was elected for a period of one year, an assistant director, elected for three months (to ensure that all members received basic training in direction), a secretary, “to keep minutes of all meetings, look after correspondence” and, as numbers permitted, a property manager, props and costume person, booking agent and publicity agent. Members should attempt to write their own plays on “local and national subjects” as well as ordering plays and mass recitations from the Toronto W.T. The group should hold regular rehearsals (twice weekly was ideal) and, according to the needs of the group, “a course of study should be formulated” to educate members on “make-up, lighting, stage direction, stage behaviour, voice culture, diction.” The group should establish a schedule of performance fees, and an emergency fund. If, as seems the case, the Toronto WT followed its own guidelines, it was a model of rigorous discipline. The two leading members of the Toronto WT, Toby Gordon and Jim Watts, were full-time YCL activists.

The best-known homegrown play from the Workers’ Theatre that has survived into the twenty-first century is *Eight Men Speak*, which falls halfway in between the *agitprop* and the “people’s theatre” ideal types. On 27 October 1933 a press release in the *Young Worker* announced that the Workers’ Theatre was rehearsing a new play: “an important play featuring prison conditions, the

---


409 Whether they received any salary is unknown.
persecution of class war prisoners, and the attempt, charged by Tim Buck, on his life."

Originally scheduled to be presented in November, the size of the cast and the elaborate staging required delays and additional rehearsals. Learning from past errors, the WT ensured that *Eight Men Speak* was well advertised. A notice in *The Worker* read:

> You have read and heard about the black hole, the lashings, beatings, tortures and the murder-attempts which go on behind the stone walls and barred doors of the Kingston Penitentiary.

> Now you will have the opportunity to see the most complete exposure of the rotten conditions with which Tim Buck and his seven comrades have to put up with."  

The play opened on Monday, 4 December at the Standard Theatre, corner of Spadina Avenue and Dundas Street. The house was packed. The audience of fifteen hundred “roared” its approval of the play and its identification with the case being prosecuted onstage. The response by the authorities was an immediate ban on future performances. They saw, in this riposte to Bennett’s “Iron Heel” and the attempted assassination of Buck, a danger that went well beyond its rapturous reception.

*Eight Men Speak* was mentioned in a *Masses* editorial in the January 1934 issue, but not reviewed in full until the March–April edition, also the last issue of the magazine. Cecil-Smith detailed the play’s reception by the public and the Toronto Red Squad, in an article titled “Government and Art.” Harking back to the debate about propaganda vs. art, he described the play as propaganda in the most honourable sense of the word:

> “Eight Men Speak” was frankly the contribution of the Workers’ Theatre to the campaign for the release of the eight Communist leaders held in Kingston Penitentiary and for the repeal of Section

---

410 “Workers’ Theatre Producing Strong Play,” *Young Worker*, Wednesday, 1 November 1933, 4.
411 “Eight Men Speak,” *Young Worker*, 15 November 1933, 4.
The play and its reception has been handled unevenly in party memoirs. Toby Gordon’s is the only one who treats it as an important event in the CPC’s history. Tim Buck does not mention the play (or any cultural work) in his several memoirs. The play does not crop up in the works of Ewen, Buller, Gould, Hunter, and others. Even the January issue of *Masses* was sedate about the play’s reception. In the Workers’ Theatre section of the journal, it was noted that “the main activity of the Toronto W.T, has been the preparation and presentation of ‘Eight Men Speak,’ which was shown at the Standard Theatre on December 4. More than 1500 saw the performance while hundreds of others had to be turned away. Another performance of the play, partially rewritten and restaged, is being arranged for a date in January.” That this is the only mention in the entire issue might indicate the toll staging *Eight Men Speak* had taken on the entire PAC membership. In addition to the actors, the play required a large production staff. The “Workers Theatre in Action” column reported that “[c]onsiderable growth in membership has resulted from this play, in which 32 actors took part, and immediate plans are being made for short courses to improve the stage work of the group. Diction, voice culture and plastic movement lectures are being arranged.” The lectures were not organized and recruitment to the WT stalled, as the intervention of Toronto’s infamous “Red Squad” ended this auspicious moment in the history of workers’ theatre in Canada. But state reaction to the play at municipal, provincial and federal levels also affirmed the importance of the cultural front for Communist politics in Canada.

---

414 Ibid.
Rather than a full, revised production, the next performance was at a rally called to protest the banning of the play. A.E. Smith's only mention of *Eight Men Speak* in his memoir *All My Life* is in connection with this rally. The play was suppressed on the orders of the Toronto Police Commission on 13 January, 1934, the day before the scheduled second performance. The CLDL organized a rally at Hygeia Hall on 17 January, with a companion PAC-organized rally taking place in Montreal at the same time. Members of the WT performed a portion of the third act, in which Jean Watts, as the prosecutor for the workers' court, exposes the prison guard's attempt to shoot Tim Buck in his cell. In his speech to the meeting, A.E. Smith reiterated his demand for an enquiry, and criticized the banning of the play.

Smith explained in his memoir that the meeting had been called

...to make a protest against an action of the Henry Provincial Government. They had threatened the Strand Theater people on Spadina Avenue with loss of their license if they permitted a second performance of a play called “Eight Men Speak.” The play had brought out an overflow crowd. Strong demands were made for a repeat performance. In the meantime the police commission in Toronto, in its supreme wisdom, asked the “Red Squad” to make a report on the character of the play. With qualifications that would not enable them to examine a horse’s mouth, these new-found drama critics handed in a report saying the play should be banned.

Several weeks after this meeting, Smith was charged with sedition. Yet Bennett’s efforts to suppress the play and quash the communist movement created only greater support for the Party and strengthened its reputation as a defender of civil rights.

Smith’s trial was the turning point in the campaign for the release of the CPC leadership and the repeal of Section 98. In the weeks before the trial commenced on 5 March 1934, the CLDL organized mass meetings and rallies where Smith repeated his indictment of Prime Minister Bennett’s role in the effort to cover up the attempt...
on Buck’s life. In November 1933 Smith led a delegation to Bennett demanding an investigation into the shooting. Bennett denied that any attempt had been made and promised Smith that each of the CPC leaders in prison would serve their full sentences. Smith was acquitted on 8 March and on 6 July the first of the leaders won early release. By 24 November, the last of them, Tim Buck, had been released. He was welcomed back by a crowd big enough to pack Maple Leaf Gardens.

In the introduction to Eight Men Speak and other plays from the Canadian workers’ theatre, Robin Endres discusses the development of proletarian theatre in Canada in isolation from the international context. Endres writes that “cultural workers of the early thirties were using artistic means to make propaganda more effective.” In accounting for the shift from strictly agitprop to a more developed form of political theatre, Endres argues that “[t]he mistake, of course, was to reject the techniques and skills of bourgeois culture along with its themes and values. Working-class culture was going through its Luddite stage. Initially, and especially in terms of the theatre, there was some logic to this. The agitprop theatre had an immediacy unknown to any other type of contemporary theatre.” Endres argues that in its early days, the proponents and practitioners of workers’ theatre had been portraying themselves. Inevitably, they found that they needed to develop acting skill and technique. This was acceptable, Endres notes, because “[t]echnique and technology are methods and materials which in and of themselves have no class content; the uses to which they are put, of course do. The agitprop movement was quick to recognize this, although the decision to appropriate whatever methods could be used from the bourgeois stage was not reached without a struggle which was carried out at the national and international level.” Despite this reference to the international level, Endres cites only debates and decisions made within the workers’ theatre movement

418 Smith, All My Life 165.
419 Tomo Cacic, however, who was generally not treated as one of the leaders, had been deported.
420 Wright and Endres, “Introduction,” Eight Men Speak xxvii.
itself, and goes on to describe its development out of “the first sectarian stage of the movement.” Endres thus reinforces the view that an immanent logic shaped the development of the workers’ theatre movement in Canada—a stance that perhaps minimizes the extent to which any such formal development was mediated by the broader political and historical context of the international Popular Front.

Treating the development of proletarian culture in Canada as primarily the unmediated expression of the working class itself also downplays the political impact of the Party’s leadership on cultural work in Canada. This ignores the leadership role the CPC sought to exercise and which the Party leaders considered absolutely crucial to the effectiveness of the workers’ movement. The Party viewed culture and cultural work as adjunct to political organizing, a venue for the promulgation of political analysis and action.

In interpreting the workers’ theatre movement as autonomous in its development, Endres also overlooks its reliance on a gendered and racialized symbolic framework to convey its message. This framework was crucial in providing the normative basis for the CPC’s political leadership. Until 1932 this appeal was directed primarily to the working class. In the face of Soviet insecurity, and as Communists continued to be targets of repression in Canada, the CPC reassessed social democracy and its relation to the middle-class constituency and culture it had previously criticized. Endres has interpreted the effects of this shift as a development of working-class culture from an immature to a more advanced and developed level. In contrast, the emphasis here is on the role of gender in appealing to a broader constituency, including those previously regarded as class enemies, for

---

421 Ibid., xxix
422 That is, by not linking the shift from its first sectarian phase to ideological and strategic developments within the international Communist movement, Endres ignores the impact of trans- and international influences on the proletarian theatre in Canada. This is especially remarkable in light of the movement’s explicit political aims and objectives. Describing the shift from a “sectarian” early phase without reference to the influence of the class war framework in which the movement developed downplays the effect of political context on culture, proletarian or bourgeois.
the support of socialism and defence of the Communist Party of Canada and the Soviet Union. The formulation of working class interests shifted considerably in this transition.

In 1932 CPC work repeatedly depicted the bourgeoisie and bourgeois culture as decadent. In the mass chant, “Theatre, Our Weapon”, published in the December issue of Masses, a member of the chorus asks:

Is it possible for our theatre NOT to be a weapon?

Chorus: NO!

1st: Down with the theatre where the bourgeois come to amuse themselves!
2nd: Down with the theatre where the idle parasites come to amuse themselves!
3rd: Down with the theatre where drunken debauchery dopes the minds of the masters and their obedient slaves!
4th: Down with the theatre which lulls the indignation of the hungry slaves of capitalism!

CHORUS: DOWN WITH IT!

1st: Long live the theatre of revolutionary anger!
2nd: The theatre organizing the will of the workers!
3rd: The theatre which has inscribed on its Red Banners

Chorus: REVOLUTION!^{424}

This was representative of the PAC’s cultural work throughout the early 1930s and into 1935, as the CI continued to call for the struggle of class against class and the defeat of social democracy. Every aspect of Soviet and CP policy was bent to identifying workers' interests against capitalism. Performances of short *agitprop* by the Workers’ Experimental Theatre, and editorials in Masses, focused on the role of bourgeois culture in supporting capitalism. Dramatic portrayals of the class basis of bourgeois culture and its role in shoring up a declining capitalist order helped to illustrate the superiority of the “socialist homeland” against capitalist states and to identify the Soviet Union with peace and progress.

Before the Popular Front, the family was portrayed in Party discourse as a potential source of danger, a shelter for the bourgeois illusions and social democratic delusions that undermined working-class solidarity. *Looking Forward*, one of the first plays produced by the Workers’ Experimental Theatre (WET), was innovative in putting the case for class struggle in family terms. The play features Betty, a renegade daughter who challenges her parents’ political passivity. While her parents accept relief cuts and unemployment as somehow necessary, she has recourse to a more assertive logic. Describing war as a victory for one set of bloodsuckers over another, she points out that:

> [t]he men who did the fighting have to go down to the Pogey House where they are treated like a lot of criminals.

> And what do they do about it? They walk in with their hats in their hands as if they were glad to get it. Charity, CHARITY. The dividends of the working class.

> I wish I was a man.\(^{425}\)

This last point drives home the idea that men are as men do, and that working-class men, in order to *be* men, must stand up for themselves. The young girl is showing the best fighting qualities of the working class. That she is a girl reinforces both the possibility and the need to refuse passivity. The conflict here is both class and generational. Betty’s father is described in the play notes as “disheartened” and her mother as a “middle aged woman to whom style no longer means anything.” (Betty is described as “modernistic” in appearance — a short skirt and bobbed hair — and in attitude.) In contrast to her parents, Betty is acerbic, astute and irreverently ungrateful. In the home, the father is portrayed as accepting of his fate, sourly cynical and simply overwhelmed. In contrast, the mother tries to exert a pacifying influence, to contain her daughter’s critical awareness. She blames Betty’s young

---

man, Jim, “young, husky, brimming with life” and, the script implies, a YCL organizer:

Mother: It’s that young man of yours, that’s who it is who is putting them wild notions in your head. Always talking about revolutions and the rights of workers. First thing you know he’ll land himself in jail with all his wild talk.

And you too, young lady. You’d better watch yourself before you disgrace us all. We ain’t never had no criminals in this family and we don’t want none now. We’ve got enough troubles without having the police after us. Your father has got enough to worry about without having a daughter in jail.426

The play ends with the delivery of a bailiff’s notice; the parents’ mortgage is foreclosed for non-payment two years short of its twenty-year term.

While the family itself was viewed with suspicion by many Communist comrades, the language and symbolism of family filled Party discourse, especially on the relation between the Soviet Union and member sections of the CI. The younger generation was encouraged to challenge their parents’ adherence to tradition and deference in the matter of Canadian class politics, but the CI and the Canadian CPC leadership encouraged filial reverence toward the Soviet Union. Member parties were criticized for not capitalizing on the “devotion and love of the working masses for the Soviet Union in order to extend and consolidate communist influence.”427 In March, 1934 the CPC received the ECCI’s report on the Theses of the Agitprop Department. Amongst other instructions, member sections were praised for their defence of the Soviet Union:

The communist parties are conducting a constant struggle in defense of the USSR as the fatherland of the toilers of all countries. The communist parties have led the broad masses many times into the streets against imperialist war and preparations of an armed attack on the USSR and in the defense of China and the colonies; and they are exposing all anti-Soviet intrigues and provocations, are

426 Ibid., 15.
fighting first and foremost the ‘enemy in their home countries’, and are displaying examples of true proletarian internationalism.\textsuperscript{428}

The report asserted the superiority of socialism through comparing the successes of the First Five Year Plan (its goals achieved ahead of time, declared complete in 1932) to the continuing crisis in capitalist countries. \textit{Agitprop} helped draw the national sections of the CI together, against the enemies of socialism everywhere.

Official histories and CPC historiography do not explain -- often they do not even register -- the cessation of \textit{Masses} with the March-April, 1934 issue. Undoubtedly the financial problems that had plagued the publication since its early days were partly to blame. Also, the tremendous public response to \textit{Eight Men Speak} shifted the focus of PAC work from polemics to dramatic work. Even Livesay comments that despite her reputation as a poet, “[a]ctually my real interest was in the theatre. In Paris I had been fascinated by Brecht’s influence on guerrilla theatre.”\textsuperscript{429} PAC activists were overextended. Despite high hopes and confident predictions, a “Ten Day Campaign” scheduled for 15–25 March 1934, aimed at making workers’ theatre a permanent fixture across Canada, did not happen. Most who were involved with the Workers’ Theatre in Toronto were involved in other aspects of CPC work, the CLDL, the Workers’ Unity League, or the YCL. The \textit{Young Worker} was in the midst of its own campaign to go from bimonthly to weekly publication, A.E. Smith was on trial for sedition, and the campaign to release the CPC leaders continued. The success of \textit{Eight Men Speak} showed how cultural activists could make an enormous difference; it also revealed the difficulties of sustaining proletarian theatre groups outside of Toronto, Montreal and Winnipeg.

The banning of \textit{Eight Men Speak} in December 1933 was followed by intense debate on the Canadian cultural left. This was shaped by Soviet pronouncements on socialist realism versus the officially vilified ‘decadent’ modernism. However, the

\textsuperscript{428} Ibid., 321.
political and cultural impact of *Eight Men Speak* in Canada (or at least Toronto) ensured that the debate was much more than a rehearsal of officially sanctioned positions and policies on art and workers’ culture. Influenced by the increasing participation of working-class youth and students, as well as cultural figures such as Morley Callaghan and academics sympathetic to the CPC’s campaign for civil rights, and members of the CPC such as Oscar Ryan, Ed Cecil-Smith, Dorothy Livesay, Lon Lawson, Stanley Ryerson and Jim Watts, the debate on art, propaganda and politics was *both* a distinctly Canadian one, informed by Canadian events and developments, *and* one shaped by an international context of Soviet, British and U.S. Communist ideas about how to create a revolutionary working-class culture.

***

The shift from the Third Period to the Popular Front meant a new Communist approach to democracy. Rather than denouncing democracy as a bourgeois subterfuge and advocating its replacement by the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat, the post-1935 Communist Parties tended to talk in terms of building on the achievements of the people, and forecast the achievement of socialism as an extension of the already impressive development of the democratic state. Rather than promising to destroy democracy, socialism’s “opposite,” the Communists promised to preserve and improve it. Similarly, with respect to cultural work, where pre-1935 Communist Parties had often talked in terms of the revolutionary destruction of bourgeois cultural conventions and their replacement by an entirely new proletarian culture, the post-1935 Communist Parties often talked in terms of adopting and transforming pre-existing mainstream culture, making it more accessible to workers and responsive to working-class needs. This ‘new’ culture

---

430 On capitalism itself, some went so far as to say that socialism would be a rationalization, not the replacement, of capitalism as a social system.
would be a continuation of bourgeois forms, a sort of ‘best of’ bourgeois culture, rather than its wholesale overcoming in a distinctly proletarian alternative. Culture came to be seen less as a weapon in the class struggle and more as a meeting-place where the working-class and middle-class enemies of fascism and friends of democracy could find common ground.\(^{43}\) Pre-1935, Communists had often conceived culture as a reflection of the class conflict by artistic means, in ways that would reproduce and render more “real” the political conflicts they were waging in other spheres. After 1935, rather than a reflection of the political situation, cultural work came to be regarded as a formative aspect of the Communists’ political work. This sea-change in the Communist climate affected the ways in which workers’ theater was conceived and constructed. Before 1935, a Communist might favour mass chants, perambulatory performances for workplace audiences, and such impromptu (if also carefully planned) happenings, whereas afterwards he or she might favour a stationary theatre performance, plays whose plot devices paralleled those of mainstream theatre, and stagecraft that more and more looked like that of its conventional counterpart. If before 1935 one had hoped to shock the bourgeoisie into a recognition of its artificiality, transience and sterility, partly through the application of explosively innovative techniques, now one aspired to meet it halfway, using familiar forms as a way of encouraging new socialist perceptions. In a sense, then, the “cultural front” discussed in the Third Period, one in which Communists did revolutionary battle with their enemies on the left, changed its meaning and even its structure, as Communists entered into alliances with people and forces with whom they hoped to collaborate but not fully to control.

\(^{43}\) One could even say that this meant that the word “front” in “cultural front” changed its meaning. In the 1920s, a Communist front was an “outward appearance or aspect; facade” — in this context, a CP-controlled group whose true identity was concealed from the public. Post-1935, a “front” took on more the sense of a “bearing or demeanour in confronting anything; degree of composure or confidence in the presence of danger,” i.e. fascism— and “the foremost part of the ground occupied, or in wider sense, of the field of operations.” The second meaning of “front” was less machiavellian and, judged from a non-Communist perspective, more honest: the point of the “front” was not to penetrate and control other elements of the left, but to confront the common danger coming from the right. See the Oxford English Dictionary, http://oxforddictionaries.com/ (accessed August 2010).
Many of these changes were influenced by the Seventh Comintern Congress. Yet, as we have already seen, many were also anticipated, in some cases by as much as four years, in North America. Soviet influence was certainly not absent as an important element in Canadian Communism, but it was not all-defining. Such important innovations as the Canadian Theatre of Action were more influenced by American cultural movements on the left than by the Soviet model, which in any case was not always easy to read for outsiders. Rather than the mere cipher of Soviet influence, the Canadian movement should be acknowledged for what it was and what it achieved — that it rendered an alternative social and cultural order conceivable, in large measure by embodying socialism in its newspapers, parliamentary campaigns, and demonstrations, but no less in its plays, poems and paintings. The shift to the Popular Front constituted a dramatic step forward for a North American cultural movement in support of progressive politics and socialism. As John Manley points out, it constituted a dramatic opening up by Communists to the middle class. Unlike their role in the preceding campaigns to build a workers’ culture in Canada, the training and skills some middle-class members of the Party possessed were now recognized as valuable by the CPC leadership. Their newfound relevance meant that middle-class intellectuals and artists in the Party could put their bourgeois training to good revolutionary use.432

The shift from united front from below to Popular Front was the take-off point for a North American cultural movement in support of progressive politics and socialism. Interpreting the work of the Canadian Theatre of Action as more influenced by the American cultural movement of the left than the Soviet model puts it in a context in which Soviet influence is not absent but is not the defining element in the history of Canadian communism. This shift of emphasis gives socialist

movement in Canada credit for what it was, for what it achieved, and for the possibilities it made -- at least for a time -- conceivable.

In her 1976 introduction to workers' theatre in Canada, Robin Endres describes the WET as “moribund” for eighteen months, between the performance of *Eight Men Speak* and the groups “reformation” as the Theatre of Action. Toby Gordon Ryan describes this period in the winter of 1933: “People involved began to drift away, many of them for personal reasons. Only a very small nucleus had the commitment needed to keep it going.” As members of the PAC, WT members were also closely involved in organizing public support for A.E. Smith, keeping people interested in his trial for sedition, as well as supporting the continued campaign for the eight CPC leaders in prison, and the repeal of section 98. They were spread very thin.

In the period between the last issue of *Masses* and the April, 1936 launch of *New Frontier*, the CPC-affiliated magazine of the Popular Front era, ideas about the relationship of culture to class struggle were significantly revised. The anti-fascist campaign in North America emerged from the youth and student wing of the movement to dominate Party politics and shift CP work toward an alliance with the middle class and social democrats. In tandem with these factors, the Party leadership became more receptive to contributions and support from intellectuals, artists and writers. In every country, but especially in England and the U.S., writers, artists and actors joined or supported a cultural movement in which the case for socialism and progressivism was integrated with aesthetic theory. The possibility of socialist culture was claimed as the way out of capitalist crisis, as the cultural front shifted from opposition to capitalism to the defence of progressivism. Central to this process was the assertion that cultural vitality depended on communism.

---

433 Ryan, *Stage Left*, 46.
The Toronto-based Workers’ Theatre did not expire when leading members Jim Watts went to New York and Toby Gordon to Winnipeg in the fall of 1934, but it was in retreat. On March 9th, 1935 the Young Worker introduced a new column, “Workers’ Theatre” intended to revive interest and activity in proletarian theatre. The column reminded readers that such a theatre did exist in Canada and that its slogan was “The Theatre is Our Weapon!” Despite the claim that over one hundred workers’ theatre groups existed in Canada, the column stirred little reaction and was never repeated. When Watts and Ryan returned to Toronto, they led workers’ theatre in Canada away from agitprop forms, and away from modernist proletcult ideas, into more traditional forms of theatre. In 1936 they joined forces again, organizing the Theatre of Action as a stationary repertory company favouring the American style of social realism over the declamatory structure of agitprop. Since 1932 Soviet commentators had suggested that workers’ theatre troupes not reject the methods and craft of established professional theatre out of hand. By 1935 the importance of mobilizing mass support for anti-fascism on the international and national levels made the alliance between conventional and workers’ theatre a strategic as well as aesthetic imperative. Whereas a staple claim within the movement had been that workers’ theatre would soon entirely supplant the decaying bourgeois theatre, the relationship between the two was now described as a progression beyond the limitations of bourgeois theatre, a building upon the past, rather than an overturning of theatre convention and craft. In general, culture was no longer cast as either bourgeois or proletarian. Rather, culture represented an organic evolution towards the full development of a national, distinctly Canadian identity. Just as “democracy” was no longer held to be inescapably bourgeois, but something the working class could transform and bring to its fullest development, so mainstream “culture” was no longer something to be opposed tooth-and-nail, but a plant to be gently nurtured and gradually transformed.
Between 1935 and 1939 both the membership of the CPC and its popular support grew considerably. Young middle-class Party members who had been active in the Progressive Arts Club were instrumental in establishing a new sort of cultural front for the Party. Largely inspired by the efflorescence of radical culture in the United States, their immediate objective was to build popular support for socialism as the best possible future. Cultural continuity rather than revolutionary change was the way forward to a classless society. The field of class struggle was transformed into the struggle against fascism, in which the stakes were historical decline or progress. The achievements of bourgeois culture would be validated and preserved in socialism as the people’s culture, the birthright of every Canadian. Those who did not see this, who continued to believe in the value and virtue of high bourgeois culture were, more or less openly, fascist. With the Popular Front Against Fascism, the cultural wing of the CPC went on the offensive, coming out in defence of democracy and progress. The importance of the cultural front in this period intensified because fascism had declared itself most clearly in culture at every level, from the arcane poetry of Ezra Pound to the family policies of Hitler’s National Socialist government.

With the People’s Front officially endorsed at the 7th CI Congress in August of 1935, CPC members entered their most productive period of socialist culture-building in Canada. Just as members were encouraged to join organizations and institutions shunned during the earlier period of class-against-class politics, and just as they were now urged to use the very forms of feminine sociability they had once explicitly derided, so too the CPC press began to use the staples of popular culture in its own work. The Party’s objective of building a united front from above as well as below meant that the contributions of intellectuals and artists, typically middle-class individuals whose membership had been previously unheralded, gained a new importance in the party. A significant aspect of the policy of cooperation with social
democrats at the leadership level was staking claim to the cultural terrain of bourgeois democracy.

This period would see class difference played down in the interest of antifascism, through images and language of the family. Reflecting the change in how CPC members did cultural work was the shift away from a political (and often didactic) emphasis in theatre and writing (culture as agitprop) to an emphasis on theatre and writing that reflected popular interests and pressing social issues. This work did not direct or instruct its audience so much as it engaged and informed them. It presented problems, issues, and ideas of common interest and sought to build consensus. Rather than demanding identification between the audience and the message, as in agitprop, this work focused on building an identification with socialism as progressivism, on dramatic portrayals of the common interest between working and middle classes.

***

The front page of the 4 April 1935 Worker carried a short item titled “Call Writers’ Congress Soon.” This was the first notice in the Canadian labour press of the First American Writers’ Congress, to be held in New York City on 26, 27 and 28 April 1935. The quote from the congress announcement combined an emphasis of Third Period agitprop with attention to questions of literary craftsmanship and technique. Three years earlier the PAC journal Masses had rejected professionalism and the cult of technique and training. The Congress announcement in the Spring, 1935 signaled a growing interest in the role of the writer, artist, etc. in working-class politics. This cultural front included published authors, teachers with postgraduate training, people whose work was to write, reflect and teach. “Today hundreds of poets, novelists, dramatists, critics, short story writers and journalists recognize the
necessity for personally helping to accelerate the destruction of capitalism and the establishment of a workers’ government.” The role of writers would be addressed at the congress, but so too would ‘literary’ issues related to the revolutionary movement. The “[p]roblems of writers will be discussed by the congress, from the political, literary and publishing angles.” Here was a happening that was both a literary event and the announcement of an important political shift, part of the mostly slow but sometimes lightening speed of developments in the culture and politics of the Communist movement. Just underneath this report was another notice: “Toronto, Ont., April 2 – Progressive Arts Club announces receipt of an invitation for Canadian writers to attend the congress.”439 It does not appear that any PAC representatives did attend.440

In the spring of 1935, four thousand people attended the opening speeches of the American Writers Congress, held at the Mecca Temple in the heart of New York City.441 The congress organizers claimed that the gathering represented the growing support of the middle class for socialism. Many who attended the congress were writers who were already members of the CPUSA; others were politically aligned and still others were politically unaligned but deeply interested in the connection between culture and political change. As crucial as marshaling writers’ support for communism was making the case that ‘culture’ itself, past and future, depended on socialism and the workers’ movement. It was in this sense that the congress was an early, opening moment of the campaign for a Popular Front.

In this campaign, writers, poets and playwrights had a crucial role to play as advocates and propagandists. Some issues remained unresolved. What should the

439 “Call Writer’s Congress Soon,” The Worker, April 4, 1935, 1.
440 If any representatives of the PAC did attend, they did not report on the congress in The Worker, or mention it in memoirs. Three prominent members of the PAC were living in New York at the time, yet they made no mention of it. This important congress has been interpreted in the U.S. as marking both the end of the Third Period and the beginning of the Popular Front.
441 The Mecca Temple was built by the Shriners (an offshoot from the Freemasons) in 1923. The building was taken over by the City of New York in 1929, when the Shriners defaulted on the property taxes.
content of proletarian literature be? And who should write it? Many of the delegates were of the middle class, and the congress signaled a willingness on the part of all involved, Party officials and writers, to reassess the role of middle-class intellectuals and artists in the working-class movement. The introduction to *Proletarian Literature in the United States* described the impact of class struggle on members of the receptive middle class:

> War, unemployment, a widespread social-economic crisis drive middle-class writers into the ranks of the proletariat. Their experience becomes contiguous to or identical with that of the working class; they see their former life, and the life of everyone around them with new eyes; their grasp of experience is conditioned by the class to which they have now attached themselves; they write from the viewpoint of the revolutionary proletariat; they create what is called proletarian literature.\(^4\)

The view that prescient members of the middle class were anxious to join forces with the revolutionary proletariat indicated that class politics remained at the core of the communist movement. Writers were seen as both the epitome of their class and its vanguard, and the affiliation of progressive American intellectuals such as Kenneth Burke with communism was read as an index of the balance of power between capitalism and socialism, an indication of capitalist decline. Burke’s point that intellectuals and writers came to communism via their interest and investment in culture, rather than class struggle, and his notion of a broadly-conceived ‘people’s culture’ became defining elements of the American (and Canadian) Popular Front period.

The representative of the All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers made a report on its own first meeting in 1934, where Stalin’s formulation of socialist realism had been officially endorsed. He described “real proletarian literature” as “literature by writers who understand the meaning of the revolution, agree with its purpose and

attempt to depict social change in its true historic perspective." While members such as Malcolm Cowley continued to see their class background as an obstacle keeping their work from being fully representative of proletarian literature, they endorsed the aims and objectives of proletarian literature entirely. Such middle-class writers saw their role as supporting the transition to a fully fledged proletarian culture.

*Masses* had ceased publication as the voice of the PAC with its April 1934 issue, so there was little debate amongst Canadian Communists on the American Writers Congress and what it achieved. April 1936 brought a replacement magazine: *New Frontier*. Its tone was very different from that of its predecessor. It defined itself not as a weapon in the class struggle but as a clearing house for the exchange of progressive ideas and opinions. By the time of its launching, a consensus had clearly been established on the need for a “people’s culture.” The CPC was remaking itself into a “People’s Party” rather than a party of the working class. The editors of *New Frontier* buried class politics inside discussions of art, culture, politics, economics, and history. Class politics continued implicitly to define the sort of literary work and cultural criticism *New Frontier* supported, but the magazine now introduced class politics as the context of, rather than the impetus for, cultural work. This was a much less revolutionary approach to creating political change.

The introduction to the anthology of talks and speeches given at the congress, *Proletarian Literature in the United States*, described proletarian literature as both art and a weapon in the class struggle. In contrast, it would be easy to miss the oblique reference to class politics and class identification in *New Frontier’s* opening editorial. Written by William Lawson, the magazine’s managing editor, the editorial detailed

---

444 There were also important developments in the way this culture was conceived, chiefly Kenneth Burke’s paper, “Revolutionary Symbolism.” This created enormous opposition and controversy, but it was a succinct statement of the approach which soon came to define the culture and politics of the Popular Front. See Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 102-103.
the impact of six years of Depression conditions on writers in Canada, and singled out for criticism those established writers who had been “singularly disregardful of or unfaithful to the social realities of our time.” Cultivating isolation, either in the Canadian North or the Ivory Tower, did not make for significant art. Yet while these Canadian writers had taken refuge, abandoning the field (described here as “the social scene” rather than “the class struggle”), there were, “on the other hand, certain individual creative artist and groups who are becoming more interested in the social implications of Canadian life, are turning out work which has both social and artistic value. NEW FRONTIER is anxious to make the best of this work available to a wide circle of Canadian readers.”

Class politics was as much at work here as in the earlier period, but now it was suffused through the work presented. Class politics defined the material in New Frontier, not in the sense of what it sought to establish, but in what it offered its readers.

The role of intellectuals and artists in building the Popular Front meant that the Party authorized relatively autonomous cultural work by its members. Before the success of Eight Men Speak, the Party leadership had given little attention to cultural work. But in the Popular Front period, cultural work became important in its own right. In some contexts, such as the anti-war movement, culture operated as the leading edge of communist politics. Even as the style and content of CPC-aligned cultural work evolved into forms mirroring those of bourgeois culture, this work remained consistent with the imperatives of class politics as defined by the Party. After 1935 this was no longer conceived primarily in terms of conflict and struggle, but in terms of progress and the protection of democratic traditions. This new tactical line enabled the Canadian party to tailor communism to Canada. In speeches and articles CPC leaders projected a socialist vision of the Canadian future that was rooted in the 1837 rebellion led by Mackenzie and Papineau.

Throughout the early 1930s, stories and news articles in *The Worker* made it clear that idealism and sentimentalism were bourgeois weaknesses, influences to be guarded against in the CPC and YCL. In the CPC press all aspects of bourgeois culture and society were cast as inimical to socialism, and middle-class recruits were required to disavow bourgeois art and culture. Within several years of the formal endorsement of the Popular Front in August of 1935, bourgeois culture was reinterpreted as a legacy, a basis for the progressive people’s culture that would reach its full flowering only in a socialist Canada.

Middle-class members of the CPC no longer hid their university credentials and professional qualifications. These became assets in the context of the Party’s effort to gain support amongst a broader section of the Canadian middle class and the Party’s reorientation as a continuation of social democracy. No longer condemning social democrats as social fascists, the CPC claimed the cultural heritage that would remain after the eclipse of capitalism. Emblematic of a society that was in the process of passing from capitalism to socialism, middle-class intellectuals and artists were reconceived as transmitters of this legacy, an important link which would bring the best of bourgeois culture and social democracy into the socialist future. Unlike class war, this framework for radical social change offered hope, stability, and peace.

Livesay emphasizes in her first memoir, *Right Hand Left Hand* that New *Frontier* was a “much better” magazine than *Masses* but neglects to explain how and why, and only notes that *New Frontier* was a united front effort to appeal to a middle-class readership. She glosses over the radical difference between each magazine’s orientation to social democrats and bourgeois institutions. Opposition to the parasitical capitalist class remains the basis of change and working class unity the basis of progress. However, in 1935 class consciousness is driven not by location in the working class but by one’s commitment to progressive politics, and class unity is rooted in broad (and vague) terms, in ‘the people’ as a progressive force, a merging of
middle- and working-class interests, which, in the Third Period, had been seen as totally opposed to each other.

With the Popular Front, the notion of culture as itself a crucial dimension of social expression and development emerged. In America and Britain the debate on proletarian and progressive culture was expanding. No longer was culture conceptualized as a “weapon” of the working class or a “tool” of the bourgeoisie. Artists, writers and critics were politically active and articulating a view of art and literature as dynamic and constructive, of culture as dialectically expressing social tensions and contradictions, reflecting and shaping reality.448 This view merged the idealist notion of culture as the artistic and intellectual achievement of a society, with the materialist emphasis on what culture does, the material or constitutive effects of art and literature.

In February 1935 the New York based League of Workers Theatres changed its name to the New Theatre League. Like the National Student League and the American League Against War and Fascism, the New Theatre League emphasized unity around anti-fascism over sectarian political differences. Its motto was “For mass development of the American theatre to its highest artistic level. For a theatre dedicated to the struggle against war, fascism and censorship.”449 This reflected the broad interest amongst the theatre community in left politics and “progressive” drama that had been building in the U.S. since 1931-32. As reflected in its new generic name, the New Theatre League became the venue in which theatre professionals shared their skills in stagecraft, scriptwriting and directing with students and amateurs in a theatre movement increasingly designated as

448 See Alick West, from Crisis and Criticism (1937), in Patrick Deane, History in Our Hands, A Critical Anthology of Writings on Literature, Culture and Politics from the 1930s (London: Leicester University Press, 1998), 133.
449 Wendy Smith, Real Life Drama: the Group Theatre and America, 1931-1940 (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 214. The change and new slogan were announced in the February 1935 issue of the journal New Theatre.
“progressive” rather than proletarian. Support for a less doctrinaire and didactic form of theatre was high within the New York theatre communities, both radical and professional (if not the more provincial groups, who, Morgan Himelstein argues, wanted to retain the agitprop form of drama). The league set up the New Theatre School in the late winter of 1935, where Elia Kazan taught a course on the “Technique of Directing.” With the other instructors, Lee Stasberg and Cheryl Crawford, Kazan designed an “Outline for an Elementary Course in Acting,” which sought to introduce students to techniques based in their physical sense of reality and their observations. The objective was to “learn how to apply our senses in a controlled way.” The teaching techniques developed by these members of the Group Theatre were based on Stanislavsky’s “System and Methods of Creative Art.” Stanislavsky’s ideas, with his emphasis on “psycho-technique” as a means of accessing and developing one’s creativity and therefore one’s ability to create ‘truth’ on stage, would have appealed to PAC members’ interest in art and the cultivation of creativity as well as to communists’ belief in science and systematic knowledge as the hope and basis for political progress.

***

Just as the shift to the Popular Front meant that democracy was no longer conceptualized as a bourgeois subterfuge but a precious resource the proletariat could inherit and improve, so too did it work a dramatic change with respect to Communist gender ideals. A core argument of this thesis, which will be explored in greater detail in the chapters focused on Dorothy Livesay and Jim Watts that follow, is that the gender ideals articulated by and incarnated in these two figures, were

---

important in facilitating the CPC’s attempt to win new bases of support in a wide-ranging popular front in the 1935-1939 period. Instead of being the harbingers of a total revolution that would change gender ideals forever, the Communists represented themselves as people just like anybody else, who appreciated a well-cooked meal, a well-ordered home, and a well-turned-out spouse. Socialism would make women equal. It would not make them unwomanly.\footnote{The \textit{Daily Clarion} in February 1937 acclaimed Soviet women for their effect on the practice of science, for “bringing that kind of atmosphere of femininity into the once cold masculine councils of scientific circles. Shoulder to shoulder with men these women go, with the spirit of Lenin to bring something new, a contribution of motherly sympathy, beauty and tenderness.” \textit{Daily Clarion}, 6 February 1937, 4.} In 1935 both women and middle-class intellectuals became central to the Party’s tactical reorientation. Rather than minimizing the significance of women’s gendered interests in peace and family welfare, the CPC emphasized them. Women’s gendered interests were seen as being politically significant and central to the work of the Party. Just as a new attentiveness to the middle class and its intellectuals might pave the way for new recruits for the CPC, so too might a related understanding of “women” become a bridge bringing many of the middle class into the Popular Front. The work of middle-class women in the Party helped the CPC re-position itself as a partner to social democrats in the fight against fascism.

Many of these themes will be explored more fully in discussions of Livesay and Watts; here, it is sufficient to draw out the vivid contrast between this Popular Front conception of gender politics and its Third Period predecessor. The “hard-line” CPC did not overlook gender politics, but it often deployed forms of proletarian masculinism that equated political clarity and resolution with heterosexual masculinity and political cloudiness and evasiveness with queer effeminacy.

In the very first editorial of \textit{Masses}, Ryan had evoked the specter of effete bourgeois intellectuals and artists, who were not only ignorant of social questions,
but were so enfeebled that they were unable to rise from the “pink cushions of bohemia.”\textsuperscript{453} The quality of ‘pinkness’ was often invoked in \textit{Masses}, conveying the wishy-washy, neither-this-nor-that character of bourgeois art and politics. It also, as in Ryan’s article, connoted a departure from true masculinity. Such masculinism in \textit{Masses} might take this unsubtle form, but it also characterized the magazine’s less obviously gendered aesthetic preferences. Contributors to \textit{Masses} claimed that their very lack of credentials, of polish and sophistication, testified to the burgeoning strength of working-class culture. This emphasis on immediacy and accessible meaning justified rooting the case for radical political change in established analogies of gender, which at the most general level linked the working class to masculine virtue and the bourgeoisie to feminine dependence and over-sophistication.

Communists, Maurice Granite explained in his short polemic “On Canadian Poetry,” would be different than the common run of Canadian poets, i.e., those who were mere parasites, pathetically individualistic, cut off from the masses. Communist poets realized that “[e]roticism in literature belongs to the past,” as did “Imagists, Dadaists, intellectual perverts, futurists, transitionalists, etc.” Rather than indulging in wearying poetical abstractions, and in the “sky in the pie” bathos that had become “a manifestation of satiated perversity,” true Communist poets would have the strength of character to come to grips with a world in which “an enormous facility of science has built cities with the clatter of steel and the hum of power and the voice of hunger – the system which stupefies, tortures, crushes, starves and crazes the builders of its wealth.” The poet of today must “level himself with the masses and learn to understand them.” He must love, not himself, but the working class, with a love “deeply energetic, abrim with action and struggle.”\textsuperscript{454} Toward this end, in April \textit{Masses} and the PAC were busy organizing a Ten Day Campaign, a workers’ cultural festival designed to parallel the newly established Dominion Drama Festival. The

\textsuperscript{453} Oscar Ryan, “Our Credentials,” \textit{Masses} 1, 1 (April, 1932), n.p.
\textsuperscript{454} M. Granite, “On Canadian Poetry,” \textit{Masses} 1, 4-5 (July-August 1932), n.p.
staging of workers’ productions across Canada would spur the growth of a pan-
Canadian workers’ theatre and “give workers who are interested in the theatre a
chance to compare the work of the decaying bourgeois theatre with the growing
virility of their own art.”

If Bolshevik men should act like men, with the rugged resoluteness and the
‘steeld’ toughness of the vanguard, Communist women were represented as falling
into two categories: the helpless, downtrodden, pathetic victim of capitalist
exploitation, or the resolute fighter and defender of her class. The first issue of
*Masses* carried a poem that distilled the first stereotype.

Gentle, quiet, workless sister:
Lonely, starving in retreat;
You are even shunning breadlines
Of your brothers on the street.

In your misery and hunger,
It is they who are to blame:
they who grasped the means of living,
Knowing no restraint or shame.

Do not weep in silence, sister!
Bring your tears and bitter sighs
As a message in the open,
That will reach the very skies!

And replace the sickly pallor
Of your cheeks with burning rage!
And demand your rightful sharing,
In the riches of the age.

The gentle, quiet, lonely, starving, and weak working-class girl was in desperate need
of her own political transformation. In joining with her proletarian “brothers,” her
ineffective tears and sighs would be transformed into a righteous rage against the
bourgeois usurpers of her fulfillment and happiness. The poem illustrates for
unemployed women workers the path of class struggle towards a better future. But
class unity depended on women overcoming their identification as and with women.

---

455 “Workers’ Culture Grows Throughout Canada,” *The Young Worker*, 3 February 1934, 7.
Masses addressed women primarily as workers or as unemployed, and (as the above poem illustrates) emphasized the fungibility of women's gendered roles. The poem, and similar analyses, emphasizes the ambivalent and uncertain status of working-class women in capitalism: poverty and overwork compromise them as women, while their conditioning as women compromises them as workers. Only class struggle and proletarian revolution will solve this dilemma. Until they join in working-class struggle, working-class women are acting against their own interests.

Bourgeois society trains women to identify with their role in the family, but working-class women's identification with this role is undercut by the logic of surplus value and wage labour, which forces them into the labour market as the cheapest, and increasingly necessary, source of alienated labour. Working-class women's unwillingness to identify with class struggle was not due to their sex, but to the mystifying effects of bourgeois gender ideology, an ideology in which the imperatives of "womanhood" undercut class identification and unity. In calling on working-class women, both mothers and workers, to actively support class unity, the Party linked women's social roles to the politics and ideology of class domination. The Party called on women to challenge bourgeois convention and thereby bourgeois domination. Yet such moments of clarity and critical acumen in linking gender and class in political analysis were sporadic and undeveloped. The overriding analytical primacy of class within the Party meant that gender remained an unacknowledged and critically underutilized category of analysis.

In the Third Period, the work of female members and organizers was critically scrutinized for signs of idealism or bourgeois sentimentalism. Middle-class members established their party mettle through denigrating and rejecting all aspects of bourgeois culture and society, especially such signs of effeminacy and weakness. This reinforced women's marginalization in radical politics, and intensified the pressure on those women who did join to follow the full immersion pattern of
membership, requiring a dedication that was hard to sustain and did nothing to lessen the obstacles to women’s active membership. The masculinist aspect of communist discourse is well recognized, but the subtler work of gender in party discourse and organization has been more often assumed than analyzed.\textsuperscript{457}

The Popular Front reversed many of these patterns, and in so doing, alerts us to the exceptional complexity of attempting to deliver categorical judgments on either phase of the Communist Party’s cultural life. In many respects, post-1935 gender politics in the CPC paralleled the conservative agenda increasingly predominant in the Soviet Union, which we have already explored; and as we have noted, CPC women were called upon to defend the illegalization of abortion and other such Soviet developments. At the same time, post-1935 gender politics also represented the sidelining of discursive patterns that marginalized, patronized and excluded all but a select few women. It allowed for the partial restoration of Florence Custance’s more holistic approach to organizing women in the places where so many of them actually worked — not just in factories but in domestic kitchens, not only in sweatshops but also in families. Communists were able to make ingenious use of a pervasive middle-class reverence for the redemptive power of culture, one that held that culture gave voice to \textit{universal} and \textit{timeless} values, to advance their own argument that a truly human culture would advance particular political objectives.

***

Although in some respects there are now many books and articles on the Communist experience in Canada in the 1930s, more work is called for on the

\textsuperscript{457} This is true even of more recent work, such as Kate Weigand’s \textit{Red Feminism}. Newton, Kealey and Sangster all address the presence and persistence of sex-based inequality on the Canadian Left, but they do not address the discursive effects of gender and sexual difference. McKay’s recent \textit{Reasoning Otherwise} is one of the first to integrate gender into an analysis of the Canadian Left, while avoiding the tautological tendencies of earlier feminist analyses on sexual difference. Candida Rifkind’s work, in several ways, has followed McKay’s example. See McKay, \textit{Rebels, Reds, Radicals}; Rifkind, \textit{Comrades and Critics}. 
Communists’ cultural vision and its mid-decade transformation. There are evidently few records or comments in official histories or memoirs on the relations between the executive leadership of the CPC and the largely youthful, largely middle-class contingent in the Party that sought, successfully or not, to create cultural work representative of and useful to the labour movement. It was a small movement, and relations between the politics and culture in the Party were often also personal relations. Activists such as Ryerson, Lawson, Cecil-Smith, Livesay, and Watts -- with these last two becoming the focus of this thesis in its concluding three chapters -- were all, to varying degrees, struggling to make sure that cultural activism was both the means and substance of socialist politics. As we have seen, official Communist memory often gives their efforts little credence, when it does not overlook them altogether.

Yet the very example of *Eight Men Speak* surely speaks to the centrality of cultural expression as a force in shaping the Communist world in Depression-era Canada. After all, in this case an “imaginary” play about the “real” imprisonment of the Communists leaders set in motion the very “real” prosecution of A.E.Smith. This trial, in turn, was seen by an unprecedented number of Canadians to be an unprincipled attack by an out-of-control government on a party that stood for social equality and progress, thus in effect creating conditions propitious for a “Popular Front” well before it had been announced in Moscow. Further bannings of the play in Toronto and Winnipeg added fuel to the flames of popular indignation. Was *Eight Men Speak* merely a passive “reflection” of political reality? Or is it not more accurate and meaningful to say that it actively shaped much of that reality?

The importance of the cultural work carried out in affiliation with the CP has been rediscovered and reclaimed, most effectively by Michael Denning in *The Cultural Front*. Denning re-evaluates the American cultural left in light of the Gramscian notion of hegemony. In the case of Canada, Alan Filewod and Candida
Rifkind are the most recent contributors to the reassessment (and reclamation) of cultural work sponsored by or affiliated with the Party. Denning's work is the most exhaustive of these studies, and the most valuable in terms of its implications for the reassessment of left culture in North America. Establishing a new perspective on the meaning of the cultural front in Depression-era America, Denning downplays the divisions which have predominated in the assessments of this period. Rather than engaging in the debate on whether the Popular Front period was shaped by Soviet control of the American communist movement or shaped by indigenous elements and developments in American communism, Denning gives both aspects credence and play. He sees them as alternately mutually reinforcing and contradictory elements in pushing and pulling the radical politics of the 1930s into a form that was distinctly American. There has been much criticism of the Popular Front as the abandonment of class politics, and Denning offers an understanding of this theme that avoids condemnation. Rather than judging this period as a whole, condemning its failures or mourning its shortfalls, the close examination of its effects -- political and aesthetic -- provides a way to understand the always unfinished work of hegemony. The sort of analysis Denning offers rescues the work of the cultural front from condemnation or nostalgia. Denning's approach thus captures the social relevance of the cultural work in the 1930s. Rather than a retreat from the rigours of oppositional politics, Denning argues “the aesthetic innovations of the cultural front wrestled with the cultural contradictions of modernity, and led to a labouring of American culture.”458 In this way, Denning illuminates the constitutive and dynamic relationship between culture and socialist politics.

In some respects, Alan Filewod's work on the Canadian Popular Front, with specific reference to its theatrical innovations, parallels the work of Denning, although he pays closer attention to the role of memory in defining the

contemporary meaning of this moment. Yet, in responding to present-day concerns and issues of historical theorization, Filewod is too schematic in his analysis of the workers' theatre movement. He sees agitprop as the “authentic” form of the workers’ movement, and the more conventional forms of the Popular Front period its polar opposite, the two incapable of coexisting within the one movement. They certainly can be contrasted and shown to be influenced by their political contexts; yet, *Eight Men Speak* and much other evidence also suggests that, for contemporaries, many complexities, nuances and combinations were possible in the world of Communist theatre. Filewod is intent on showing that the CPC was responsible for both the life and the death of the Workers’ Theatre in the mid-1930s, yet he thus minimizes the ways in which this experimental form was effectively put to work in much broader circles.\(^{459}\)

A crucial issue Filewod's work raises concerns the authenticity or inauthenticity of the “workers' voices” we hear in the Communist-influenced works of the era. As we have seen, the advent of the new middle-class recruits was of prime significance to the CPC in the 1930s, and they themselves wondered if they were articulating or inventing the workers' voices they represented. Avrom, the YCLer whose drawings and cartoons filled the CPC press, raised this very issue when in 1932 he attacked PAC artists who stayed at home, isolated from the masses, thinking up “proletarian subjects” for their newest “huge” canvasses, “which in most cases never materialize, or if they do, never leave their ‘creator’s’ house.”\(^{460}\) Avrom here seemed to be critiquing not only such artists’ isolation but also their authenticity. Were they not idealizing or mimicking workers they did not really know? A paradox of much CPC cultural radicalism, one might say along these lines, was that the middle-class intellectuals who frequently articulated it were often ventriloquizing notional

\(^{459}\) Alan Filewod, "Performance and Memory in the Party: Dismembering the Workers' Theatre Movement," *Essays on Canadian Writing*, no. 80 (Fall 2003), 72

\(^{460}\) Avrom [Yanofsky], “Between Ourselves,” *Masses*, 1,6 (November 1932), n.p.
workers, ascribing a revolutionary identity to them rather than reflecting or reporting working-class views. “The workers will produce, are today producing, their own writers, their artists, their revolutionary intellectuals,” proclaimed the introductory editorial in the first issue of *Masses*: “MASSES is the first publication of its kind to appear on Canadian soil, produced from the life of Canada’s factories, farms, -- and breadlines. It has a whole battlefield of barbed wire to traverse. It will rip down the wire. It will with the support of the workers succeed at least, if in nothing else, in throwing its credentials on the table, though they be not endorsed by the elite.”

Members of those who formed theatre, literature, and art groups across Canada were making culture for the masses, but the idea – and the objective – was that the working class would soon be making its own culture. This was not an unjustified view, given the enthusiastic response proletarian culture was evoking in audiences in Canada and the U.S. In what was to be the final issue of the CPC-aligned journal *Masses*, editors depicted proletarian culture as small but growing: “[e]ncouragement and a chance to print has been given to a small body of Canadian worker-writers, who have shown that they are able to produce material quite on a par with most bourgeois writers.”

As Candida Rifkind has shown, in *Comrades and Critics*, the composition of communist cultural organizations was always a mixture of workers and upper- and middle-class members. The latter saw themselves as having renounced their class affiliation and identity and “gone over” to the other side, the workers’ cause. In America this identification was evoked as “merging with the masses,” an image which conveys a conscious disavowal of the bourgeois ethos of individualism.

The example of *Eight Men Speak* can be used in this context as well.

Undoubtedly the play is didactic, combining Third Period thinking with emergent

---

463 Rifkind, *Comrades and Critics*, 36.
Popular Front styles of presentation. At the same time, something in the play registered with thousands of people. Not just the text of the play, but the context of its reception and the struggles it set in motion must be taken into consideration when viewing it historically. Both the brutal response by Draper and Bennett and the enthusiastic response of the audience for *Eight Men Speak* established the value of dramatic work, both theatrical and literary, for the Party. The power of the play to incite such a positive response from the public and a negative response from authorities validated the work of writers and artists for the Party. Talented and trained intellectuals and performers plainly could play a valuable role. While many of them were aware that they were making culture *for* the masses, they were convinced that the working class would soon be making culture *of* the masses. Thus, while the voices of the workers we hear in *Eight Men Speak* are not those of ‘real’ Canadian workers, Canadian workers identified with and claimed the play’s voice as their own.

In other words, once grasped more dialectically, the “authenticity / inauthenticity” paradigm begins to lose some of its plausibility. And some of this sensibility can be found not only in the histories of the reception of particular manifestations of “proletarian culture,” but in the artistic works themselves. Rather than wait passively for the happy future when the proletariat would truly become the heroic vanguard of the theory, the progressive cultural producer was obliged to immerse herself in the process through which this new class consciousness would be unified. This cultural strategy was presented bluntly in Mona Weiss’s poem “My Fellow Stenos” in the July–August 1932 issue of *Masses*:

```
My fellow-stenographers
Look down on typists;
And they in turn
High-hat the office boys,
While the gawky youths
Throw knowing superior
Looks at the
Elevator girls;
```
After working hours
The elevator girls
Clutching their tabloids
In crowded street cars
Move diffidently away
From the factory girls;
And factory workers from
Laborers, and so on
Down the line.

What blinds you,
You stupid workers,
To your equality?
What idiotic dullness
Prevents you from seeing
That capitalism stirs up
This hatred amongst you
To strengthen its
Quickly decaying foothold?
Throw off this false
Pride which binds our souls
And tired bodies!
Break through the shell
Of hypocrisy!
Reach out — reach out
For your brothers’ hands
And UNITE!464

Thus, while in a sense the new generation of progressive artists and intellectuals was engaged in a kind of class ventriloquism, ascribing revolutionary sentiments workers did not necessarily hold, in another sense they asserted a dialectical sensibility in which their poems, plays, and paintings were part of a general process of social awakening. They were not distant or removed observers, but engaged activists seeking to understand and change the working class in the process of transforming themselves.

Chapter Five

“This struggle is our miracle new found”:

Dorothy Livesay and the Cultural Front

Dorothy Livesay (b. 12 October 1909, d. 29 December 1996) was one of Canada’s best-known female poets. Born in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Livesay lived in all parts of Canada except the far North. She spent her childhood in Winnipeg, her youth in Toronto, and her mature years in the West. She raised her family in Vancouver and in later years settled in Victoria. Livesay’s talent as a poet was recognized early, first by her parents and later by fellow poets Raymond Knister and E.J. Pratt and such critics as W.E. Collin, author of the first study on modernism in Canadian poetry, The White Savannahs (1936). Livesay’s first book of poems was Green Pitcher, published in 1928 when she was just nineteen.\(^{465}\) Over the next 60 years, she published many more books, the last of which was The Woman I Am (1991). In 1998 a posthumous collection, Archive For Our Time, brought together Livesay’s uncollected and unpublished poems.

Over her life, Livesay’s literary development was shaped by her political interest (her commitment to socialism) and by her concern to bring sexuality into the centre of her literary work. Especially in her later poetry, Livesay focused on sexuality, which has made some critics reluctant to engage with her work. But it is her distinctiveness and daring in this respect, in addition to her technical expertise (most notably her willingness to blend dramatically different voices into her poems) that explains much of her influence and reputation as a modernist poet. Her poetry

\(^{465}\) Dean Irvine points out that Livesay’s father arranged the publication, on the stipulation that he would pay the production costs. See Dean Irvine, "Among Masses: Dorothy Livesay and the English Canadian Leftist Magazine Culture of the Early 1930s," Essays on Canadian Writing 68 (Summer 1999): 183-213.
about political or sexual engagement and alienation is a record of the struggle to love, detailed in poem after poem.

Although she considered herself a Westerner and identified strongly with the Prairies, Livesay spent much of her youth in the East, in Toronto and (briefly) Montreal. She was eleven in 1920 when the Livesay family moved to Toronto, where her father had taken a position as the managing director of the newly formed Canadian Press Cooperative News Service. The family lived in a duplex on Walmer Road, in Toronto’s Annex area, close to the University of Toronto. Livesay attended Glen Mawr, several blocks away, at Spadina and Bloor Street West, a small private girls’ school specializing in the arts. Both Livesay’s parents worked at what she described as “the writing game.” Her mother, Florence Randal Livesay, was a columnist, translator and poet; her father, John Frederick Bligh Livesay, a journalist and essayist. Livesay had one younger sister, Sophie, who became an artist and eventually settled in Ireland.

In 1991 Livesay gave a bleak summary of her parents’ marriage: “[w]hat seems clear to me now is that these two people should not have married.” Livesay described her mother as being “in an unacknowledged revolt against the woman’s place in the home.” Livesay’s father was the prevailing influence in her life, and she took after him in many ways. He was mercurial and occasionally malicious. Livesay writes about him with a mixture of love, admiration, anger, pity, fondness and resentment. He was a self-described radical and iconoclast who struggled with alcoholism and a pronounced stutter throughout his life. Livesay’s memoirs and poetry reflect her intense ambivalence about both parents, but especially her father. This ambivalence runs through all her writing, poetry and prose.

466 Dorothy Livesay, Journey With My Selves (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1991) [hereafter JWMS], 52.
Despite his own unhappiness, J.F.B. Livesay doted on his two daughters. He introduced Dorothy to his favourite authors and made sure she read all the work of the contemporary female novelists he admired. Neither parent was authoritarian and each actively encouraged their children’s creative efforts. J.F.B. Livesay talked to Dorothy and Sophie about everything; they were expected to have opinions and these were taken seriously. In a 1967 interview, Livesay’s girlhood friend, Jean Watts, warmly evoked Livesay’s father:

His whole life centered on those two girls and their friends. And he used to treat us all like grown-ups and invite us to lunch at the Royal York and have green turtle soup and strawberries in December, and that sort of thing. When you’re fourteen and you’ve been out to lunch with a real grown-up man, it is a tremendous thing. And they never really treated them as children really; they were part of the adult world.  

Through her mother, Livesay learned about contemporary poetry and met such well-known Canadian poets as Charles G.D. Roberts. Through her father, Livesay encountered prominent journalists and publishers. Despite their own considerable differences, Livesay’s parents pulled together when it came to cultivating Livesay’s talent and intellect: “As the first-born, very articulate child, I came in for the most attention. My father assumed responsibility for my education in reading, while my mother took on the encouragement of my writing.” In 1927 Dorothy Livesay matriculated from Glen Mawr and went on to Trinity College, University of Toronto. She studied romance languages and despite doing well academically, did not much enjoy her time at university. Livesay was intellectually inclined and socially awkward. She felt deeply alienated from her professors and fellow students.

In her first several years of university this sense of estrangement was acute. Livesay was especially awkward around young men. For the third year of her degree

---

468 Dorothy Livesay fonds, MSS 37, University of Manitoba Archives and Special Collection [hereafter Livesay fonds], box 1, folder 8.
469 Livesay, JWMS, 89.
Livesay went to France, where she studied at L’Université Aix and lived with a local family. When she returned to the University of Toronto for her final year in the fall of 1930 Livesay was socially more comfortable and confident. Livesay received her degree in the spring of 1931 and that autumn went again to France, this time to Paris, where she studied for a Diplôme d’Etudes Supérieures at the Sorbonne. She spent the year comparing the work of T.S. Eliot and the three Sitwells (Edith, Osbert and Sacheverell) to French metaphysical poetry. Her 1932 thesis, “Symbolism and the Metaphysical Tradition in Modern English Poetry,” traced the connections between these contemporary English poets and such French nineteenth-century poets as Baudelaire and Verlaine.

By the time she traveled to Paris in the late summer of 1931 Livesay had already become a published poet; shortly after her return, in 1932, Macmillan would publish a second collection of poems, Signpost. By the time it was published, however, Livesay was no longer interested in writing what she called “lyric” poetry. She wanted to write socially- and politically-engaged poetry and to do “useful work,” remaking the world. Her unconventional and somewhat radical father undoubtedly had some influence on this choice, but Livesay’s interest in Marxist theories and politics was as much spurred by two university friends, Jean Watts and Stanley Ryerson, both fellow students at the University of Toronto. It was with Watts in 1930 that Livesay first became interested in Marxism and socialist politics. In 1932, her affair with Stanley Ryerson was pivotal in cementing Livesay’s commitment to radicalism.

Ryerson and Livesay became lovers in the fall of 1931. They lived together in Paris, while Ryerson was taking the third year of his degree in modern languages, and Livesay her Diplôme d’Etudes Supérieures. The French working-class movement inspired both of them and they became deeply interested in the political situation in France and Canada. They were outsiders in the French movement, but when they
returned to Canada, they joined the Communist Party. By this time they were no longer lovers, but fellow activists in CPC mass organizations.

In 1932 Livesay joined the Young Communist League and the Progressive Arts Club (PAC), which we have seen was one of the Communists’ most important cultural initiatives of the 1930s, especially during the most acute period of illegality when so many of the Party’s top members were in jail. Livesay remained active in the Communist movement from 1932 until c.1939. She moved West in 1936, married a non-party man in 1937, and became a mother in 1940. She is unclear about when she ceased to be an active member of the CPC, but her marriage to Duncan Macnair, theosophist and reluctant activist, would have made any such attachment increasingly problematic. Canada’s declaration of war on 10 September 1939 sent the CPC underground and Livesay thereafter was effectively “isolated” from the Party.470

When she first became active as a Communist, the CPC was in the depths of the Third Period. Despite her growing reputation as a poet, Livesay focused her efforts over the next several years on activism and writing agitprop scripts for demonstrations and political meetings, all part of the CPC’s struggle to build a proletarian culture. Between 1932 and 1935 Livesay tailored her writing to her political work, producing agitprop mass chants for children and short political poems such as “Broadcast to Berlin.”

In 1936 Livesay joined the editorial board of New Frontier, a magazine launched in April 1936 by her friends and CPC comrades, Watts and William (Lon) Lawson. She was a contributing editor and, with her departure on a Western lecture in the spring of 1936, became the magazine’s Western representative. Livesay’s lectures on the New Literature established a different role for her in the movement, as author and proponent of what the Party began to call “people’s” -- rather than “proletarian” -- culture. By 1936 the prior relationship between Livesay’s poetry and

470 On Livesay’s ambiguous treatment of her relation to the Party in 1939, see Dorothy Livesay, Right Hand, Left Hand (Erin: Press Porcepic, 1977) [hereafter RHLH], 278.
political work -- in which the latter shaped the former -- was inverted. Now she channeled her political efforts into her own writing (poetry and reportage) and into promoting the “New Literature,” the work of professional writers and poets aligned with the communist movement.471 The emphasis on antifascism in the Popular Front period attached new meaning to Livesay’s middle-class affiliation with bourgeois culture. Once drawbacks, Livesay’s class background and professional stature were now assets in broadening support for socialism and strengthening its cultural legitimacy. She was an important connection between the middle- and working-class worlds. She provided living proof of the Party’s ability to reach beyond its traditional ethnic and class bases to encompass new social strata. Cultural producers could cite her work as evidence for the thesis that the way forward for culture as a whole lay through socialism. The importance of cultural work in the Popular Front empowered Livesay by authorizing her talent and commitment as a writer within the Communist movement.

Livesay arrived in Vancouver at the end of April 1936. Her formal involvement with the Party effectively ceased with her marriage in August 1937, to a man who was neither a CPC member nor fellow traveler. Livesay was required to give up her position as a social worker with the Welfare Field Service of British Columbia when her new husband found a job in an accounting firm. The early days of Livesay’s marriage were not auspicious, and the “New Literature” she championed was resisted by the men in the Vancouver writing group she joined. Its members resented her authority, her sex, and her Eastern connections. Removed from the support of friends and comrades in the communist cultural community in Toronto, Livesay’s own literary renaissance was short-lived:

For five years, from 1932 to 1937, I had been immersed in useful work on behalf of women, the unemployed and peace. Now there

471 As earlier discussions have suggested, this shift away from sectarian class politics had begun in 1934 (with anticipations even before that date). It was then officially endorsed by the Communist International in 1935 and gained substance within the “cultural front” policies of the CPC by 1936.
seemed no outlet for these interests, and certainly no way of earning “pin money” from writing poetry. I was unemployed. For the second time in my life I became deeply depressed.472

After the birth of her first child in 1940, both her political activism and her literary output ceased for several years. Now with her own family, Livesay remained on the West Coast for the rest of her life, leaving only to take up several appointments as writer-in-residence at universities across Canada.

In her memoirs Livesay describes two periods of literary regeneration. The first was the winter of 1935, when she discovered the New Literature. This resolved the obstacles of being a middle-class writer in a working-class movement. Livesay linked her epiphanous experiences of 1935 to her discovery of the “social” poetry of the British poets Stephen Spender, Cecil Day-Lewis, W.H. Auden, as well as the Irishman Louis MacNeice.473 James Doyle points out that Livesay’s “discovery” of Day Lewis and other contemporary poets enabled her to reclaim modernist technique in her own work. Their work was modernist but not ‘decadent’ in the way of Eliot’s poetry. It also coincided with her departure from direct political activism and a period of convalescence from “a slight nervous breakdown” early in 1936. The second was in 1951, when her husband died. Her widowhood released Livesay from the strictures of womanhood in ways that her involvement with the CPC had not. Her response to the news of her husband’s death was “I’m free, I’m free.” That Livesay did not consider divorce indicates her sense of obligation, but also her considerable investment in conforming to the expectations of womanhood. Only her husband’s death absolved her of what she clearly experienced as a considerable burden.

472 Livesay, JWMS, 156.
473 Livesay, RHLH, 153. See also James Doyle, Progressive Heritage: the Evolution of a Politically Radical Literary Tradition in Canada (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2002), 149, who points out that such intellectuals as Day allowed Livesay to imagine a “modernism” different from that of the decadent Eliot.
There have been books and many articles written about Dorothy Livesay. She has been profiled in many interviews and even in a documentary film. In two memoirs and one book of lightly-fictionalized memoir, Livesay herself took care to reflect upon, and at times reconstruct, her life and times. Yet in all of this work the significance of her involvement with the Communist Party has remained obscure. Until recently, Livesay’s time as a member of the Party was seen by others as a negative influence. Even she remembered it as part of a youthful period, one to be recalled with a certain fondness but also with a sense that it belonged to a very distant era in her life. This view has been challenged by literary historians Dean Irvine and Caren Irr, as well as by Alan Filewod and Candida Rifkind. These scholars have focused on proletarian culture and the Popular Front in Canada. Agreeing with this new emphasis, in this chapter I also focus on Livesay’s Third Period work. I argue that Livesay’s involvement with the CPC and its mass organizations had a more sustained effect on her life and work than she has acknowledged.

Her memoirs, as well as the manuscript and personal papers she carefully kept and eventually deposited in various archive collections, demonstrate clearly how CPC comrades -- especially Watts, Ryerson, and Lawson -- remained pivotally important to Livesay throughout her creative life. Each of these three was deeply involved in the Party during the 1930s. (Indeed, they were more “Communist” than Livesay herself). And each of them remained involved long after Livesay left Toronto in 1936 and the Party around 1939. As the focus of her poetry shifted in the post-war period, she stayed in touch with them, continued to dream about them, to


write to them, and eventually to write about them. Throughout her life this decade remained a touchstone in Livesay’s work, and she often returned to it, trying to understand the relationships that defined that period.

Livesay was interested in women’s lives as workers and mothers and lovers, in their work as writers and artists, in their social status and in the forces that shaped their lives. On every level, psychic, political and economic, explicitly and implicitly, she challenged women’s subordination. Thus she would become an important figure in the cultural history of Canadian women and acclaimed by second wave feminists as an important influence upon them. At the same time, paradoxically, she never felt fully comfortable with feminism as a movement, and remained politically at arm’s length even as she paid close attention to its long evolution. Sexual equality was central to her work as an activist and as a writer, though she did not involve herself in a formal sense with the feminist movement in Canada.

In her 1987 biography, Lee Briscoe Thompson described Livesay’s year in Paris as a turning-point in her outlook. Here was the moment when Livesay was influenced by her “exposure to Marxist principles and French student activism but academically committed to a dissertation on metaphysical and symbolist poetry...[and] found it difficult to muster the enthusiasm necessary to write her thesis on what seemed to her such socially irrelevant verse.”476 However, Livesay’s 1931-1932 criticisms of T.S. Eliot’s work were more complicated than Briscoe suggests. Livesay criticizes this work as socially irrelevant not primarily because it did not address the political climate of labour unrest and class conflict, but because it borrowed the form and substance of nineteenth-century French metaphysical poetry. Livesay praises the beauty and technical finesse of the poetry by Eliot and the Sitwells, but criticizes its backward aesthetic orientation. It was ‘irrelevant’ not primarily because of its political outlook, but because it drew on forms and patterns

of literary expression already achieved by Baudelaire and Verlaine. Livesay appreciated their work, but criticized its character as elegy rather than engagement. Many have portrayed this as a period in which Livesay chose politics over art. They draw far too sharp a distinction between the two. Livesay’s most successful poetry was written to express the tensions and dynamic in which the poems themselves were produced. When she returned to Toronto in 1932, Livesay’s challenge as a poet was to work from her newly radicalized sense of social context.

Livesay’s reorientation as a poet in North America took time. In the summer of 1931 W. E. Collin visited her at Charlotte’s Coffee Shop on St. George Street, which she and her sister were running briefly, earning money for her coming year at the Sorbonne. Collin was collecting material on modernist poets in Canada and interviewed Livesay. His study, *The White Savannahs*, was completed and published in 1936. In this Collin writes sympathetically of Livesay’s political commitment, and with reference to such intellectuals drawing close to Communism, describes its effects on their poetry:

\[\text{[T]o Dorothy Livesay or to Andre Malraux, communism seems to quicken his creative powers and restore his fertility. In bourgeois society he feels estranged, severed from his ethical roots. Instead of reaping sterility in isolation, he wants to live in communion with society and draw out its struggles, problems and collective myths power and vision for the creation of new epics.}\]

Collin’s initial interest in Livesay’s poetry was based on *Green Pitcher* (1928) and *Signpost* (1932), both collections Livesay distanced herself from after she returned from France and became politically active. However, Collin’s assessment of the impact of her political engagement on her poetry was made as she was beginning to fuse technical skill with political commitment in a new poetry of her own. The political poetry Livesay wrote in the first part of the 1930s was different, in its

---

modernist style, from the work of less accomplished poets in the communist movement, but it was frequently didactic and undeveloped.

In many critical assessments of her “social protest” poetry, Livesay’s concern for working-class hardship is faintly applauded, amid louder dismissals of her poetry as merely “ideological.” This assessment obscures the influence, good and bad, of Communism as both a movement and an ideology on the young poet at a crucial stage in her literary development. Briscoe notes that during the period that Livesay was most active in the Party, her output fell from an average of 40-50 poems per year to less than 12 in one year, and Livesay herself has commented that she stopped writing poetry during this period. Her declining productivity has been attributed to the constraints exerted by CPC dogma on Livesay’s literary expression. Rather than stemming strictly from such an external limitation, however, this decline also reflected the difficulties Livesay experienced in transposing an explicitly class-based perspective into poetic expression.

For such critics overlook the fact that much of the poetry for which she won her first Governor General’s Award in 1944, including her epochal poem “Day and Night,” was written during the second half of the 1930s, in the thick of her career as a Communist militant. Moreover, they are not attending seriously enough to Livesay’s own verdict on her pre-1932 work, which she considered preliminary and critiqued as overly ethereal. Her ability to produce poems that were adequate to what she thought of as the cultural crisis of her age, and to do so in a literary and political sense, took time to develop. Her involvement with the Party made it necessary for her to re-think her views on art and re-orient herself in terms of her position as writer. Such a re-orientation was, no doubt, daunting, and precipitated her breakdown in 1936. However, it was also crucial for her development as a poet. It is too simple to figure the CPC in Livesay’s life solely as a distraction, a burden, or a constraint.
Dorothy Livesay was a member of the CPC from 1932 until c.1939. Her time as an active member was relatively short, yet this period remained important to her throughout her long life. She reclaimed and recycled her time in the Party in both of her memoirs, *Right Hand Left Hand* and *Journey With My Selves*. While her involvement with the Party was limited by her commitment to her own development as a poet and writer, it has been Livesay’s work, more than that of Fairley or Watts, that brought the Canadian Left to life for subsequent generations of political activists and artists.\(^{478}\)

***

In the late summer of 1931 Dorothy Livesay arrived in Paris to begin a year of postgraduate study at the Sorbonne. During this year she lived, off and on, with Stanley Ryerson. Ryerson had come to Paris at the end of a hiking tour through Spain and France over the summer of 1931. He decided to remain there to do the third year of his degree in Modern Languages at the Sorbonne. Jean Watts, Livesay’s longtime friend and Ryerson’s traveling companion, was also in Paris, after rendezvousing with Livesay in Southern France. Watts returned home to Toronto in the fall of 1931. Livesay knew Ryerson from the University of Toronto. The three were part of an informal group that met to discuss Marxism and the Soviet Union in the apartment of a young political science lecturer, Otto Van der Sprenkel, with whom Watts and Ryerson had traveled that summer. Livesay’s studies at the Sorbonne went well, even though (as she tells it) her interest was shifting from her postgraduate work to her relationship with Ryerson. As Livesay analyzed such poets

\(^{478}\) Watts’s and Fairley’s work has tended to be perceived as “Communist work,” i.e., work whose interest is narrowly limited to those who are interested in the Party. They have both been, perhaps unfairly, marginalized as a result. Livesay, in contrast, has enjoyed a huge reputation as a major Canadian poet. Her memoirs, produced after she attained this renown, are written from an estranged and standpoint, one not unaffected by popular perceptions of the Communist left in the period of the Cold War.
as Rimbaud, Verlaine, and Edith Sitwell, Ryerson read Marx, Engels, and Lenin. Ryerson was an influence upon her, but not the only one. In her Sorbonne thesis, in which she underlined the importance of “emotional thought,” Livesay gave shape to a sentiment that would influence her throughout her CPC career. Poetry should reflect prosaic concerns and day-by-day struggles, not exalted forms of life. Its power lay in expressing what is common in human life rather than that which is esoteric and sublime.

When Dorothy Livesay returned to Toronto in the spring of 1932 she joined the Young Communist League (YCL), and became involved in the Progressive Arts Club (PAC). Livesay’s first PAC meeting was held at Settlement House, between John and Beverley streets, in the late summer of 1932. (This was just south of the YCL office on College Street, and one block north of the Communist bookstore on Queen Street West.) PAC members were grouped into writers’ and theatre divisions. Writers created scripts and chants to be performed by members of the Workers’ Experimental Theatre. Livesay joined the writers’ section of the PAC. Joining many workers and some other young, middle-class individuals in Toronto, she immersed herself in the Communist movement, particularly the YCL. Livesay was surrounded by people who were becoming politically engaged and many of these became either active in or supporters of the CPC. Livesay recalled that in Toronto, and during visits to friends in Muskoka and Montreal that summer, ‘everyone’ talked about art and politics.

---

479 For work on her thesis, see Livesay fonds, mss 37, box 4, folder 7.
480 This was expressed in a poem Livesay wrote in Paris:
“It’s true, philosophies/Have never darkened me/I live in what I feel and hear/And see.”
481 She worked with Stanley Ryerson and Lon Lawson. Lawson had been a theology student at St. Michael’s College at the University of Toronto, and had earlier intended to join the Catholic priesthood. For *Masses* he reviewed books, mostly non-fiction, and movies. Ryerson contributed polemical pieces on topics such as “Education and the Proletariat” and agitprop plays such as “War in the East.”
In 1932 Livesay embraced the notion that “[a] writer must become fused with the people for whom he is working in order to be able to voice their sentiments.” As an intellectual and artist, Livesay elected to speak for the working class. Her initial contributions were primarily criticism of bourgeois culture, perhaps because she had a surer sense of what this was. The gist of Livesay’s early criticism in *Masses* was to pit a largely-unformulated, even rudimentary proletarian culture against the highly-developed forms of bourgeois culture. She was applying, in the realm of aesthetics, the Third Period politics of class against class.

The first two issues of *Masses* carried poems but no discussion or criticism of poetry. The July–August issue featured an article by Maurice Granite (Oscar Ryan), “On Canadian Poetry.” His article makes it clear why Livesay would have hesitated to showcase her own poetry in her early days as a member of the PAC. “On Canadian Poetry” was a part of the debate about the social role and significance of art, which Granite interpreted here as being either connected to life, or cut off from it. Granite characterized the work of Canadian poets as dealing either with nature -- cloud formations, northern landscapes, etc. -- or with “some imaginary, freakish monster,” the creation of a fevered mind. (Here, perhaps, he was thinking of Rimbaud and his kind). Both were now irrelevant to a Depression generation. Indeed, Granite concluded that for the most part, the traditional Canadian poet “has nothing in common with the wide masses, and the wide masses will have nothing to do with his poetry.” In order to create a poetry that would be read widely, the “Canadian poet must cease to be an intellectual parasite” and turn away from outmoded forms, schools and models. Bourgeois poetry was characterized by an unhealthy obsession with sex. It was unconnected to “real pulsating life.” But it

---

83 In *Progressive Heritage*, James Doyle claims that “Maurice Granite” was probably a pseudonym for Oscar Ryan. Although it is not fully substantiated in Doyle’s account, I find the association plausible. Ryan was a poet, playwright and critic, and had published poetry in *Masses*. He was a formidable force in the PAC and a leading editor of *Masses*. 
would rule the roost no more, Granite assured his readers, because “Imagists, Dadaists, intellectual perverts, futurists, transitionists, etc.” had had their day. “Men are weary and bored with poetical abstractions. Men stand aloof from the ‘pie in the sky’ bathos, which has become a manifestation of satiated perversity.”

Livesay’s own poetry was similar in style to the imagist work of Amy Lowell, H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) and Emily Dickinson. She had spent the previous year reading and writing about the sort of poetry Granite dismissed as perverse and irrelevant. Yet in 1932 Livesay endorsed Granite’s disparagement of modernist poetry as irredeemably bourgeois. The new poetry should emphasize class. It should relate art to politics by always referencing the struggle of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie. Proletarian art was the expression of class struggle, the articulation of proletarian opposition to bourgeois culture. This contradiction defined all poetry, writing, art and drama. Only by recognizing it could one lay claim to political principle and analytical clarity.

The PAC’s cultural work was based on the fundamental premise that class difference was foundational. In the Third Period context any association with bourgeois culture and ideology was condemned. Middle-class members were expected to repudiate their middle-classness. They were required to affirm their allegiance to the workers’ cause and working-class culture. In her memoirs, Livesay retrospectively underplays this element of left politics and revisits the past with second-wave feminist questions in mind. The subtitle of her 1977 memoir, *Right Hand Left Hand*, was “A True Life of the Thirties: Paris, Toronto, Montreal, The West and Vancouver. Love, Politics, The Depression and Feminism.” Neither subtitle nor text indicates much about the CPC’s centrality to left politics in Depression-era Canada, nor about the Third Period to the CPC’s cultural profile in the early 1930s. She described her work in the YCL, assisting a party organizer: “The

---

young organizer for whom I wrote pamphlets had two children; and a wife who was ‘unpolitical’ and left behind in the kitchen whilst we were at meetings. Naturally, she resented the fact that I would spend evenings with her husband, typing up his leaflets.” Livesay felt “sympathy for those thousands of women who were unable to play an active role in politics, often because their politicized husbands still regarded them as property – ‘I married her to raise my children.’”

As a woman, and retrospectively, Livesay could understand the woman’s unease (“naturally”). Yet in the 1930s, Livesay felt removed from the working-class women left at home and did not overtly challenge the sexism that kept them there. Other members did. The letters columns to the CPC newspapers The Worker and The Daily Clarion resound with appeals from women (and the occasional man) for Communists to change their gender politics. Men should help out at home, so their wives could attend meetings. Organizers should make sure meetings accommodated women with children.

Without acknowledging the gendered character of her own work in the Party, Livesay aligned herself in her memoirs with the CPC’s women: “In theory, we were free and equal as comrades on the left. In practice, our right hand was tied to the kitchen sink.” With this, Livesay implicitly paralleled her own place in the CPC to the women at home, and alluded to systemic sexism within the communist movement.

Throughout Right Hand Left Hand, Livesay includes documents from the 1930s: poetry, articles, letters, photographs. In text linking sections on the years 1933 to 1939, she offers insight and observations, but often fails to take these to their full critical reach, both in relation to her experience in the CPC and her relationships with key people in this period. This is especially the case in her comments about

485 Livesay, RHLH, 123.
486 Ibid., 124.
487 Livesay’s observations are constantly balanced – awkwardly and obviously – between offering insight and asserting (or exercising) editorial oversight. The metaphor of “right hand left hand” was well chosen, insofar as it acknowledges the dueling impulses that characterize her account.
feminism and communism. Livesay’s efforts to portray her Depression-era life faithfully and honestly are characterized by a high degree of ambivalence, and any number of tensions — such as her full identification with the CPC at the time as opposed to her later awareness of its shortcomings, her identification with heterosexual womanhood as opposed to her late questioning of its limitations, and her distance from the subject-position of the women marginalized by the Party’s sexism as opposed to her later interest (if not full endorsement) of feminist politics.

At the time, Livesay espoused the CPC’s intellectually rigorous response to the ‘Woman Question’ and rejected feminism as an incomplete analysis of inequality. Communism, unlike feminism, offered both workers and women the possibility of overcoming their alienation. On an analytical level, it recognized the link between intellect and emotion as something that was not unique to women. Yet as a woman, Livesay remained vulnerable to the nostrums of bourgeois conventionality and to the idea that women’s distinct fulfillment resided in love and family. Livesay understood and sought “fulfillment” as a woman in the most mainstream, heterosexual of ways. She was herself fully invested in the “womanhood” she sometimes critiqued so forcefully. Her work throughout the 1930s is a fascinating record of her contradictions, both personal and political on a question that she finally resolved, tentatively, by marrying and leaving the Party.

The work produced by the writers’ and drama sections of the PAC illustrated their close alignment with the political and cultural line of the CPC, yet they were more than a CPC chorus. Masses in particular served more as a forum for discussion and debate on the emerging culture than as a venue for its dissemination. Livesay participated in this debate, and her contributions generally indicate that her views of proletarian art and culture in 1932-1934 reflected Party doctrine, rather than her own reading and reflection. She knew very little first-hand about the lives of working-class men and women, and in general her work was based on the Party’s ideas about
and ambitions for women, specifically class solidarity and support for industrial militancy.

The first poem Livesay submitted for publication in *Masses* was “A Girl Sees It!” published in the March-April 1933 issue. It is in many ways a remarkable poem, one that works within a Third Period aesthetic, and yet subtly transcends its limitations. Livesay re-creates the world of a young domestic worker, employed in the home of a genteel family. She is a woman who is both within and outside the bourgeois world: “I have learned to talk like you,/ To keep things pretty and clean and nice; to be/ Happy because the jelly turned out right,” Livesay has her tell us – in words that convey the comfort of middle-class urban life, yet also suggest its triviality. Charlie, the son of the family, is left alone with our narrator, and the two of them make love.

O lovely whiteness of you! Lovely body
Young and burning for me. What a joy
to seize your mouth and know your hunger there –
And greater hunger otherwhere.
All winter through the whiteness of the snow
The chill, still day, you burned in me. Until
The dark night plunged, and you came with it, fast.

Rather than relying strictly on the archetypal “serving girl betrayed” narrative routinely developed in the social reform literature of the day, and as often reproduced in newspaper reports, Livesay here gives her female protagonist a passionate delight in sexuality, a warm refuge in the chill world of bourgeois decorum. But the next stanza announces: “I’ve done with that...” Pregnant, the domestic worker reflects on the feelings of injustice she experiences: “To be living in a house like that, and paid/ for doing it, my body and my mind/ for them, my own life bought and sold for them.” Her sense of injustice is deepened by her expulsion from the bourgeois home when she is sent off to a Salvation Army hospital to give birth to

---

her child. She is “saved” not only in a conventional sense, i.e., from the social disgrace of having a child out of wedlock, but also from her warm feelings for the child’s father:

The son had nothing. A student only he was
I remember him saying it hurt like hell.
I remember I was almost pitying him –
The twisted look in his face, and the dark eyes.
For a long time I ached because of him
I loved him, you see, and the habit wouldn’t break –
Not easily that is; not till I saw
The way those women treated me, as if
Their kindliness had hardened down to this:
Girls come and go; it’s the day’s work – but you feel
They’re proud because they’re well brought up, without
Those circumstances where the sole pleasure is
The worst one (in their eyes). They eat and drink
But do not feed the living body made
By food and drink. They live useful lives
And even see the city, look at it:
But clamber back to green solariums.

Ironically, the Salvation Army also saves the narrator from religion (“I didn’t get religion. But instead I got a hold on things at last”) and, outcast and destitute, she starts to see the world differently. The transition is difficult at first: “Lonely it was at first,/ And I had a way of brooding; thinking things/ Over and over too much. Ready to die/ Or go out whoring, whichever came along.” But with it comes a new sense of belonging to a different order. She wilfully refuses any return to “the unreal town.” Instead, living near the waterfront, she witnesses the labourers’ daily struggles and indignities -- tramping to work, begging from the boss, evictions from a “crowded sandwich shop” if they were dirty or unkempt, arrests on trumped-up vagrancy charges. In a restaurant, confronting such an eviction scene one more time, she becomes enraged.

I was so mad I clenched my fists, grew hot
Ready to fling myself and kick the cop.
The man beside me saw, and seized my arm.
“Say kid! No use. Sit still.” I looked at him,
Scornful at what I thought his “cowardice”.
But he wasn’t a coward. He wasn’t quiet at all
But he said, “sit still,” and taught me the hard fact
That one lone rebel does no good at all.
You’ve got to know what you’re fighting against, and then
You’ve got to show others the way. Together you’ll swing
Out onto the road. That’s solidarity.”
I listened. And more than once I listened to him.
Till after a while it was I myself who cried:
“I have a son who’ll be a fighter yet!”

The transformed woman now reflects back on her earlier experience of love, and sees it from a new perspective:

I have a man now who’s not white like snow
But who can take me, and be glad of that –
But will not let himself be lost for love.
There’s bigger things than love to be worked out;
There’s darkness, madness to be fought against:
The men who will not see the only way,
Then men who choose religion or some crank
Philosophy wherein to lose themselves –
These must be battled with before we’ll find
The going easy, and the world’s new army stretched
From mine and farm, on to the factories

The poem is notable for the artistry with which it weaves together very different urban landscapes, from bourgeois solarium to proletarian coffee-shop, and especially its evocation of sexual longing and joy. In this poem, Livesay portrays the working-class girl as a desiring subject. She is not the passive victim of a rich man’s son. Livesay makes it clear that the girl relished her sexual encounter with him and looked back on him with an attachment nearing love. She is capable of reflecting on her experience and on the changing circumstances that now give it a different resonance in her life. And although the “Party Man” obviously implied by the quietly resolute coffee-room advocate of solidarity is cast in the traditional role of a man instructing a woman, Livesay nonetheless gives her protagonist much of the driving energy of the scene, which is propelled by her (and not his) willingness to “fling myself and kick the cop.”
In this poem, Livesay positions women in the dynamic of class conflict and struggle, as moving from the periphery of the movement into the rush of history, confronting policemen and marching up the city streets. There is much Third Period masculinist orthodoxy in the poem -- it is our protagonist’s “son” who will be “a fighter yet,” and Livesay reminds us that “There’s bigger things than love to be worked out” -- yet there is also much that subtly reinstates the agency, and the voice, of a working-class woman, one whose sexuality, self-reflective intelligence and even potential aggressiveness is emphasized. With it, Livesay actually challenged the masculinist presumptions of CP ideology, all the while seeming to confirm them. She puts a more complex and dialectical version of ‘woman’ into circulation than those commonly found in the Communist world. The poem works because it brings the Party’s emphasis on women as workers to life by focusing the experience of class conflict in the body of a believable young female worker. It makes women fully social individuals. Livesay’s poem gave substance to the Party’s Third Period portrayal of working-class women and men as equals by virtue of their common class interests. It also exemplified Livesay’s own aesthetic doctrine of uniting emotion and intelligence in well-crafted work.

Livesay attached the initials D.L. to “A Girl Sees It!” perhaps so that it could not be attributed to her definitively. This may have reflected her newly-discovered proletarian modesty -- or, more likely, her uncertainty about how the poem would be received. The poem is, in a sense, walking a difficult line. It could easily have been as “sentimental” and “overwrought” by class-against-class die-hards. It might as easily have been dismissed as “propagandistic” by the middle-class critics who had earlier noticed Livesay’s work.

Perhaps because it was so open to interpretation, this poem was the last one of this kind Livesay would publish for several years. Over the next two years, she wrote primarily didactic agitprop poetry that largely foreswore any effort to recreate a
working-class sensibility, work that was of a piece with much of the material published in *Masses*. The magazine’s partisans called out loudly and often eloquently for the creation of a working-class culture and denounced with an equal vigour the decadence and torpor of its bourgeois antithesis. Yet their essays on culture tended to be more dogmatic than perceptive or even reflective. While some members of the PAC, notably Ed Cecil-Smith, held out against reductive theories of art and culture, debates regularly became preoccupied with condemnation rather than criticism. Increasingly, the Soviet model was held up as that which offered clarity and certainty to these often cloudy, if passionate, debates.

The first open contribution Livesay made to *Masses* was an article on “The Guild of All Arts,” a project of the Art Students’ League to form a cooperative, associated with the Robert Owen Foundation, to provide housing and income for artists by establishing a community open to wealthy guests. The problem, Livesay writes, was that the eyes of League members “are so filled with bourgeois dust that they cannot see what is happening.” Rather than indulging in such efforts at benevolent cooperation, artists must actively engage in class struggle on the side of the working class. The proposed guild was a fool’s game, similar in logic to the newly formed CCF and the parliamentarism of J.S. Woodsworth and Agnes Macphail. As Livesay proclaimed: “[t]he aim of the artists of the proletariat is not exclusion and individualism. Not ‘cooperation’ with bourgeois wealth, but solidarity with the workers’ struggle.”489 An editorial on an exhibition of work by members of the Ontario Association of Artists made the same point: “Is there any difference between a paid portrait painter and a bohemian artist? No! They express the ideas of the same class, they are paralyzed before they lift the brush.”490

The view of art as pure and removed from class politics was denounced as delusion, a limitation of the artist’s role to lifeless artifice rather than the expression

of truth. The class struggle was the truth — indeed, it was life itself. Maurice Granite ended his essay on Canadian poetry with a demand for poems about “the sufferings and triumphs of the working class,” ones providing a frank account of life equal to the men it would describe: “Propaganda? Yes! But is this not life? Is not life propaganda?” His direct questions limit the reader to the unequivocal: yes! Or no! For the workers, or against them; for life, or against it!

Livesay’s burlesque poem “Pink Ballad” appeared in the December 1932 issue. Its scornful attitude toward social democrats, in some ways the poetic equivalent of Stewart Smith’s Socialism and the CCF, was representative of the Third Period PAC.

Hot stuff, baby! Hot stuff, baby!
A crack and a joke and a smile.
Hot stuff, baby hot stuff, baby:
Sunshine and socialist guile!

Take a look at Woodsworth -
See his nice goatee.
Who’s to save the country?
No one else but he!

Agnes too will help him
She’s never read Karl Marx
And so she says she’s fitted
To drown the Bosses’ barks.

And then the two together
By “reason,” not by force
Will form a little commonwealth
And make each other hoarse.

Shouting about happiness,
The “will to live,” free bread,
When capital and Labor
Will share the self-same bed.

O then we’ll all be equal:
Free leisure, work, repose
While Woodsworth is our premier
And Aggie hugs her foes!

492 Livesay choose to include this poem in her first memoir, Right Hand Left Hand, in the chapter detailing her 1936 discovery of Spender, Auden et al. It follows several pieces reprinted from New Frontier, and while Livesay noted its original publication in Masses in 1934 and said it “represents the hard line against social democracy and magazines like the Canadian Forum” (RHLH 176) she doesn’t explain its significance or place in her narrative.
Chorus: Hot stuff, worker! Hot stuff worker!
A crack and a joke and a smile.
Hot stuff, worker. Hot stuff, worker
Sunshine and socialist guile! 493

Like other middle-class PAC members, Livesay’s knowledge of working-class life in 1932-34 was recently acquired and relatively minimal, gained as a member of the CPC and as a student of social work. For all its effective and powerful exploration of one working-class girl’s plight, “A Girl Sees It!” confined its close descriptions of a household to the sumptuous, solarium-equipped mansion of her employers; the girl’s own quarters, and those she shares with her new working-class partner, are but sketched in. Raised by her somewhat bohemian parents and trained in high bourgeois culture, Livesay lacked the grounding in working-class life necessary for its effective poetic representation. She relied, not on first-hand experience, but on the counsel and insights of the CPC and Comintern, as channeled by such luminaries as Ryerson and Lawson. In the company of her other University of Toronto comrades, she took refuge, for a time, in theoretical debate and analysis about what working class culture should look like. Proletarian culture, such young Communists proclaimed, would automatically blossom in a workers’ society. In the meantime, they reasoned, genuinely proletarian artists were both scarce and inexperienced. The Communist movement thus needed the contributions of class-conscious intellectuals and artists, however imperfect they were, either because of their bourgeois origins or their faulty cultural achievements. The workers needed compelling art, and they would keep needing it in the interval between the emergence and the triumph of the Communist movement.

In the summer of 1933 Livesay moved to Montreal to take up a social work practicum with the Family Welfare Association. 494 While in Montreal, Livesay

493 Masses, 1, 7 (December, 1932).
remained an active YCL member and continued to write agitprop for the Toronto chapter of the PAC, much of it published in *Masses*. She also wrote mass chants and poems, with an especially effective one commemorating the murder of Nick Zynchuck, an immigrant worker shot in the back by a Montreal police officer during a protest against evictions.

In such poems as “Canada to the Soviet Union,” Livesay followed Ryerson’s (and the CPC’s) counsel: poems should be directly, unequivocally political, with the class struggle as their theme. In this poem, the first published in *Masses* to which she attached her own full name, Livesay graphically compared the miserable life of the working class in Canada to the strength and happiness of Soviet citizens:

> I believe in the beauty of your faces, brothers and sisters,  
> I receive the challenge from your eyes, and tremble with joy.  
> Mine are the restless millions, the women broken,  
> The furrowed faces, the struggle to live, to battle  
> Stamped on a child’s thin body.  
> Mine are the homeless, degenerate! Desperate young thieves[,]  
> Prostitutes;  
> Mine are the breadlines, the hostels crawling with vermin --  
> (One week’s rations in a sack for a family of nine).  
> ...  
> Because of your young faces, children of revolution!  
> Children broad-shouldered and sturdy, sprung of a lusty seed:  
> Where love battled with hatred -- class against class.

> Because of you we have learned that soon “this kind of thing”  
> will flower above the ruthlessness  
> of the bosses’ Iron Heel.  
> We shall see beauty rising from the roofs of factories  
> We shall see armies marching through new fields of wheat:  
> We shall be unashamed to face you comrades!  
> For our children will have songs, at last  
> To spur their eager feet!495

Didactic content is delivered through images of political regeneration and organic growth. Livesay claims the power of love for the workers’ movement through portraying this as a family, while her emphasis on the robust health and spirit of

494 The Association was headquartered at 4755 Rue Saint-Hubert. Livesay shared an apartment on Rue Saint-Denis with Maysie Roger, a fellow social worker.
495 D. Livesay, “Canada to the Soviet Union...” *Masses*, (March-April, 1934), 9.
Soviet children symbolically aligns socialism to well-being and a bright future. The Soviet Union symbolizes hope, but Livesay emphasizes that it is also the new standard, and we will not be able to meet our Soviet siblings without shame until workers, having overcome Bennett’s notorious “Iron Heel,” make Canada a socialist country. The example of the Soviet Union is interpreted by Livesay as not simply the victory of workers over bourgeoisie, but of love over hatred, beauty over depravity. The poem identifies the end of poverty and class inequality in Canada with the ideological leadership of the Soviet Union and the political leadership of the CP. Livesay discerns a clear link between the Soviet Union and Canada, a link between CPC and Soviet leadership and the way forward for Canadian workers. Love and beauty will prevail in a Soviet Canada.

This unsubtle poem, dissimilar in its direct didacticism to “A Girl Sees It!”, suggested the extent to which Livesay, deeply inspired by the Toronto PAC’s success with *Eight Men Speak*, was drawn to the atmosphere of agitprop. Yet it lacks the play’s forceful style and playful technique. Livesay fused a feminized moral outrage with a passionate commitment to the cause of world revolution. Here, as elsewhere in much CPC discourse, it was an allegorical ‘Woman,’ a stylized mother and wife, that figured most prominently, and not a real world woman. In the good proletarian woman the essential qualities of womanhood (care, nurturance, selflessness) were matched by an unwavering class consciousness and commitment to workers’ unity. In this Third Period framework, the good proletarian woman was a force in working-class politics because she fought not for herself but for her family and her class. Like the “Girl Who Sees It”, the true proletarian woman realizes her place is beside the workingmen as they fight for a better day.

The debate on art and propaganda in the pages of *Masses* reflected uncertainty about the place of middle-class progressives in working-class politics. What role could and should they play? No consensus emerged from the long debate among
PAC members. Their views clashed, sometimes fiercely. Cecil-Smith would even suggest that the climate of uncertainty made some hesitate before producing anything. Opposition to bourgeois culture, such as that epitomized by the left reformism of the *Canadian Forum*, could at least function as a minimal basis for unity. Beyond that, and notwithstanding the sweeping and abstract language in which the case for proletarian culture was expressed, the Communist literati were not too confident of themselves. Middle-class members of the PAC nonetheless believed that their redemption lay in the workers’ movement - the artist’s or the intellectual’s best hope for a meaningful life.

When she returned from Montreal in the summer of 1933, Livesay became a fulltime CPC organizer, and by 1934, her life was more that of a Communist activist than a literary figure. She was recruited by J.B. Salsberg to help organize clerical workers into the Workers’ Unity League.\(^{496}\) Livesay was also pregnant, and underwent an abortion shortly after she arrived home. Through CPC comrades Livesay found a sympathetic doctor who performed the abortion at his office after hours. She made the visit and returned to her parents’ home on Rosemount Avenue. They were away, at Woodlot, the house J.F.B. Livesay had built in Clarkson. Livesay had told her father about her need for an abortion:

> Alone upstairs I panicked. I telephoned my father. “It’s done,” I said. “But I’m scared. Can you come?” “Right away.” “Good. Tell Mother I have a fever.” And so they came. In the morning Gina and Lon visited, closed my bedroom door and helped with the bedpans. They had to tell my mother that I was having a hemorrhage and should stay absolutely quiet.\(^{497}\)

The young man Livesay had been involved with in Montreal was a working-class comrade and friend, most likely Lloyd York. Livesay was not deeply in love with him. She was still recovering from her love affair with Ryerson. Later she would explain

---

\(^{496}\) Livesay, *RHLH* 115; *JWMS*, 82.

\(^{497}\) Livesay, *JWMS*, 142.
her immersion through 1934-5 in Communist politics with reference to her own troubles: “Maybe it was a sort of game, my year in Montreal and the following one in Englewood, New Jersey. I was thrusting myself body and soul into politics, likely to assuage the pain of my lost love affair.” Yet, in a sense, she was also alienated, by virtue of her frequent migrations from place to place, from the warm and tightly interwoven communities that sustained urban Communist life. Livesay throughout her memoirs emphasizes the disjunction between her political and emotional lives, and implies that being a Communist meant parking one’s emotions at the door. She makes brief reference to several brief love affairs with fellow CP members, in Canada and the U.S., affairs that were always subject to the exigencies of their political work. Of her time in Montreal, Livesay recalled that the Party leadership made it clear that politics must come before love and family. Female organizers were expected to put their hearts into their work, and if necessary, to sacrifice their hearts to their work. The sense of alienation this sentiment created for Livesay only increased when she moved to the United States in the autumn of 1934 and became active in a CPUSA cell in Hackensack, New Jersey.

While she was in Montreal, the Party delegated Livesay as its representative to an early united front initiative, the organization of a peace movement among Canadian youth. Livesay’s professional qualifications as a social worker and her class background helped establish her credibility among the wide range of progressive organizations involved, from the Women’s International League Against War (WILW) to the Student League of Canada. While the CPC continued to damn the social democratic politics of leaders such as J.S. Woodsworth and Agnes Macphail, by 1934 the League Against War and Fascism was actively building alliances between

498 Livesay, JWMS, 144. The love affair Livesay refers to here was with Stanley Ryerson, not her Montreal comrade.
499 “No babies. That was the general rule we had to face up to. If we were to do useful political work—preparing and distributing pamphlets, organizing unions, rallying at meetings—we could not be tied down to nurturing children.” Livesay, JWMS, 145.
communists and social democrats. Livesay has noted several times that it was the Party’s antifascist work that confirmed her in her initial decision to join the Party. This retrospective emphasis on antifascism minimizes the extent to which Livesay was committed to the Party and its program, as well as the appeal of communist ideology to Livesay and her peer group.

When Livesay returned to Toronto in the summer of 1934 the leadership of the CPC remained in jail. The Toronto labour movement had been seething for months with the campaign to free the eight CPC leaders, with numerous rallies at Massey Hall and smaller locations. The sedition case against A.E. Smith (whose son, Stewart Smith had become acting head of the Party) ended with the senior Smith’s acquittal in March 1934. The rallies continued. The May Day celebrations in Toronto that year were the biggest ever. On July 6th 1934 Matthew Popovich and Sam Carr were released. At the end of September Tom Ewen was released, to the great relief of his wife, Beckie Buhay. Tim Buck, the last CPC leader in jail, was released on 24 November.

In September of 1934 Livesay left Toronto for New York City. She stayed briefly with Jim Watts and Lon Lawson, who were now married and living in Chelsea while Watts took classes in directing and acting at the Group Theatre. Livesay had risen from the YCL into the CPC in the summer of 1934. The coming year broke the momentum of her rise in the Party. Initially, political work was her priority, so much so that the first thing she did after arriving by bus at New York City was join an illegal picket line downtown. Livesay also made a stab at getting a labouring job: “My first attempt at a job in New York City was answering an ad from a fish cannery. On the telephone the man told me I’d have to get up a 5:00 A.M. and be on the other side of the city by 6:00. The wages were quite low and the hours long.

500 The two separated shortly after. Some speculated that Ewen had undertaken the marriage only at the urging of CPC leaders.
The Lawsons certainly discouraged me from doing that sort of work.” She instead found a job as a social worker, the field she was professionally trained in. She was hired as a caseworker at Memorial House, a community centre across the Hudson River in Englewood, New Jersey. Livesay would later remember that this period was the last time the three of them – Watts, Lawson and Livesay - agreed about political work in general and antifascism in particular: “In those days intellectuals were made to feel needed; we felt ourselves to be a part of a worldwide struggle.” Though she had followed them to New York City, Livesay was not in close touch with Watts and Lawson over this year.

Livesay’s New Jersey memoirs focus on her relationships with co-workers. She says little about her involvement with the CPUSA, except “[i]f I had the time and space really to record the facts of belonging to an underground movement in the U.S. – across the river from New York’s Worker’s School where I took course [sic] in Marxism – I might, even today [1977] compromise some of my good American friends.” The greater New York area was the epicentre of the nation-wide cultural movement Michael Denning has described as the “cultural front,” the “labouring” of American mass culture. It was an atmosphere electric with new proletarian possibilities. The explosive growth, especially in 1934, of what amounted to a new American art, writing and drama was both conducted and chronicled in New Masses, the CPUSA-affiliated weekly cultural journal.

Living in Chelsea, and studying at the New Theatre School, Watts was at the centre of this new cultural movement; Livesay, on the other hand, seems to have been curiously unaffected by it. Aside from noting the impact of her discovery of the commonwealth poetry of Auden, Spender and Macneice in 1935, Livesay says nothing

---

502 Livesay, *JWMS*, 82.  
in her memoirs about other literary influences, about her own development or production between 1934 and early 1936, nor about any of the American poets, such as Muriel Rukeyser, Edwin Rolfe, Langston Hughes, Genevieve Taggard, or Alfred Kreymborg, whose work was being published in the communist press. Her failure to mention Muriel Rukeyser’s work is especially notable. Rukeyser’s first collection of poetry, *Theory of Flight*, was published to wide critical acclaim in 1935.505

This oversight reflects a persistent feature of Livesay’s memoirs: her effort to decontextualize events and relationships. The description of her “discovery” of the new poetry of social protest by middle-class British poets in a bookshop in New York (Spender, MacNiece, Auden, Day-Lewis) does not mention the outpouring of new poetry by young American writers who were either members of the CPUSA or supporters of it. The New York communist press was filled with coverage and criticism on literature and drama. Livesay gives no indication she was aware of the immense outpouring of Communist-aligned cultural work in New York City. The first meeting of the League of American Writers was held at the end of April in New York City. Thousands attended as spectators, hundreds as delegates, and the congress papers and proceeding were quickly published. The congress had been announced in a January, 1935 declaration that was signed by virtually every well-known left wing American writer. The Toronto PAC knew about the congress, and its members had been invited to send delegates.506 Yet Livesay doesn’t mention any of this, including the important and controversial paper by Kenneth Burke that set the direction cultural work would take in the Popular Front. If what Livesay found in that bookstore was a more middle-class brand of social protest poetry, one that she could identify with and emulate as a middle-class poet, she had not looked around

505 Rukeyser had already been writing for the Communist press for several years in 1935, yet steadily refused to conform her own poetry to political dictates of style or content. There are parallels between the two women’s lives and work, but Rukeyser was a more distinguished poet.

506 *Worker*, 14 April 1935.
her, at the hundreds of American writers (most of them of the middle class) who were doing this work in the U.S.

Given this context of interest and activity in socialist culture, and considering that Watts and Lawson were living in Chelsea, virtually in the midst of it, Livesay’s account of this period is disingenuous: “At this time I made the greatest literary discovery of my life. In a Greenwich Village bookshop I found the poetry of Auden, Spender and C. Day Lewis. My one sorrow was that I had no one with whom to share my excitement.” Livesay did not find (or at least did not cultivate relationships with) other writers through her involvement with the CP. In Montreal she had had a brief affair with a fellow member, whom she describes in *Journey With My Selves*: “He found it difficult to write, or to speak up, but he was eager to learn. I noticed that he was very responsible in carrying out political tasks. I was not in love with him, but his gentleness and kindness made him a true friend.” Livesay’s relationships with others in the CP were based on their shared political work. She had affairs with other members of the CP, but makes much of the fact that as a comrade she was expected to be immune to romantic illusions about love. This perceived expectation only increased her sense of alienation within the CP. Her discovery in that Greenwich Village bookshop was so significant because she was in a period of intense emotional and intellectual isolation. Livesay had “poured” herself into her political work in Toronto, Montreal and then New York, as a way of hardening herself against personal disappointment. Her identification with the Party had enabled Livesay to cope with Ryerson’s decision to end their relationship after they returned to Toronto in 1932. She had moved out of the apartment she shared with Watts when she learned that Watts and Ryerson had become lovers, in Fall, 1932. Livesay never got over what she considered her betrayal at the hands of Ryerson and Watts (“I had been near despair at losing Tony [Ryerson]. I was still

---

507 Livesay, *JWMS*, 148-149.
Livesay became a good Communist in the 1930s by not putting her heart into her work.

Soon after she began work at the New Jersey community centre, Livesay became involved in a CPUSA cell in an adjacent town. She discovered that the members, mostly middle-class students, were out-of-touch with the labour movement and distant from workers’ lives. Livesay became lovers with a member of her cell, a young engineering student. Her departure from the CPUSA followed her discovery that her comrade-lover was about to marry another (non-party) woman. Without having first explained the situation to Livesay, he brought her to the banquet celebrating his engagement. It seemed to mark a particularly low point for Livesay, for whom relationships were so often unhappy.

Yet this period also provided her with new insights into the complexities and tensions of working-class life. What particularly marked Livesay was her exposure to American racism. The poetry and script reproduced in Right Hand Left Hand and her account of this period in Journey With My Selves are focused on this aspect of her experience in the U.S. Livesay’s effort to form friendships with several black co-workers at the community centre were stymied, and her encounter with racism in her white American neighbourhood re-affirmed her belief in communism, but now with the emphasis shifted from communism as a primarily political movement to communism as a broad humanist social and cultural program. This surfaced in several poems and dramatic pieces written after her return to Toronto, work she included in Right Hand Left Hand.

One of them, the radio play The Times Were Different, typifies the halting didacticism of so much Third Period work. It is a thinly-disguised autobiographical work centered on Livesay’s relationship with Paul, a black co-worker and would-be lover in New Jersey, and likely provides some of the immediate context for Livesay’s

---

508 Livesay, JWMS, 140.
breakdown and return to Toronto. The play names but does not effectively portray the problems and tensions Livesay wants to explore. It is, like much of Livesay’s memoir, autobiographical fiction and drama, a means of re-writing the past in a form more flattering to Livesay. The main character, Margaret, explains her motivations and passions to Davey, a character loosely resembling Stanley Ryerson, who, very much unlike Ryerson in his relationship with Dorothy Livesay, keeps proposing marriage to Margaret. She describes leaving her job:

_Margaret:_ ...So I had to go home then, defeated. I hadn’t been able to make race relations work, any more than anyone else...Up in Canada the houses were the same, the people were the same, the street was the same...But I was different!...One evening I tried to explain it all to Davey.... You see, Davey, I’ve always fought against things that seem wrong - but this thing, I don’t know how to fight it. I feel beaten. I can’t solve anything!

_Davey:_ You can’t solve it! Who do you think you are, Jehovah? Heavens, woman, things as big as the race question have to be solved by the people themselves. It’s the blacks will have to fight it out.

_Margaret:_ But shouldn’t the whites be responsible too? There must be something even one person can do - there must be something?

_Davey:_ There is, but it’s just not on the grand scale you planned for, Margaret.

_Margaret:_ What, then?

_Davey:_ Just keep on living and acting the way you believe...³⁰⁹

Eventually, Davey again proposes and Margaret finally succumbs.

For all its trademark Third Period didacticism, the play moves subtly away from the class-against-class framework of work securely rooted in the early 1930s. The play’s resolution hinges on individuals attaining political empowerment through self-knowledge (rather than merging themselves, and losing themselves, in the massifying movement of the proletarian revolution). And Livesay, centering to such an extent on race, follows a direction charted by the CPUSA but one, which, over time, led away from the Third Period’s class reductionism. In this play, and in her remaining cultural work within the Party, Livesay’s approach to political work as

³⁰⁹ Livesay, _RHLH_, 149.
writer and intellectual was no longer rooted in a politics based strictly on class position and class-against-class war.

Livesay’s time in New Jersey was formative in another way: as noted earlier, it was there that she discovered the poets whose work would henceforth deeply influence her own. In standard narrative fashion, Livesay closes the story of her time in the U.S. with a positive (if not exactly happy) ending, i.e., a glowing description of the discovery that filled her with hope and renewed purpose: the poetry of Auden, Spender, Day-Lewis and MacNeice, who became known as “the thirties poets” in Great Britain. Writing sixty years after, Livesay indicated the depth of her isolation at the time: “My one sorrow was that I had no one with whom to share my excitement.” Livesay was temporarily estranged from the Party, and on leave from her job at the community centre (she would return only briefly to it in the fall of 1935). Jim and Lon Lawson had returned to Toronto several months before, in June of 1935. In her earlier memoir, Right Hand Left Hand, Livesay gives a fuller account of her reaction to this new poetry:

What was my astonishment and unbelief to find some slim volumes of English poetry -- revolutionary poetry but full of lyricism and personal passion. C. Day-Lewis first, then Spender, then Auden and MacNeice. There was nothing like it in America or Canada, but it was a movement that followed exactly where I had left off with my Paris thesis -- it threw Eliot aside and proclaimed a brave new world. I think I must have wept over the discovery, but there was no one of my friends and comrades who would have taken any interest in it. All I could do was write a poem myself, celebrating the new horizon.  

---

511 Livesay, RHLH, 153.
Shortly after this discovery Livesay left the U.S. A nervous breakdown took Livesay home to her parents in the fall of 1935, to recover at Woodlot, her father’s house in Clarkson.\footnote{I use the term “father’s” intentionally. While it was the home of both Livesay’s parents, the property was her father’s in the sense that he designed, furnished, landscaped, and mentally dominated it.}

Her discovery of “the thirties poets” in the summer of 1935 had opened a door for Livesay to return to her own literary work. The Popular Front climate also allowed her to position herself in the movement as a middle-class intellectual and poet and to speak from this perspective. Some of her most brilliant Depression-era work dates from this period. In these poems Livesay moves away from didacticism and also from the strictures of socialist realism, now becoming dominant in the Soviet Union itself, while reaffirming her commitment to class struggle and communism.

Perhaps the most famous of all these poems is “Day and Night,” which takes a quotation from one of Lenin’s famous pamphlets\footnote{See V.I. Lenin, \textit{Twelve Years} in V.I. Lenin, \textit{Collected Works}, Vol. 7 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), 203.} and transforms it into a haunting evocation of the mechanization of work in a steel factory: “One step forward/ Two steps back/ Shove the lever,/ Push it back.” The movement dictated by the brutal \textit{pace} of industrial life is counterposed to its eerie \textit{placelessness}: “We move as through sleep’s revolving memories/ Piling up hatred, stealing the remnants/ Doors forever folding before us.”\footnote{Dorothy Livesay, \textit{Day and Night}, \textit{Poems By Dorothy Livesay} (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1944), 16-21.} The poem brilliantly combines lyric patterning and imagery with political protest. Central to the poem are the biblical figures of Shadrach, Meschach and Abednego. Their story is an allegory of the faith – the three walked through fire, protected by their true belief.

Livesay had used their image before, in a letter she wrote from Paris to a Toronto friend 1931, to refer to the divisions that her commitment to communism
was creating between herself and friends and family. In 1935 the reference to these figures of faith and fire in “Day and Night” works to link black and white together against the bosses’ efforts to divide and destroy workers’ strength. Unlike her *agitprop* work, “Night and Day” evokes the political argument for communism through imagery and structure:

We were stoking coal in the furnaces; red hot  
They gleamed, burning our skins away, his and mine.  
We were working together, night and day, and knew  
Each other’s stroke; and without words, exchanged  
An understanding about kids at home,  
The landlord’s jaw, wage-cuts and overtime.  
We were like buddies, see? Until they said  
That nigger is too smart the way he smiles  
And sauces back to foreman; he might say  
Too much one day, to others changing shifts.  
Therefore they cut him down, who flowered at night  
And raised me up, day hanging over night -  
So furnaces could still consume our withered skin.

Shadrach, Meschach and Abednego  
Turn in the furnace, whirling slow.  
Lord, I’m burnin’ in the fire  
Lord, I’m steppin’ on the coals  
Lord, I’m blacker than my brother  
Blow your breath down here.

Although Livesay holds out class solidarity as the solution, the revolution that will turn day into night and night into day is created through a creed based on necessity, not religious or political certainty. Workers come together because they are in fact the same; their work together makes this reality clear. The depiction of working-class life here is not heroic, and workers must “add up hate” before they can turn life the other way. There is no direct reference to political leadership except for common cause with other workers. This poem merges the positive and projective style of socialist realism with a modernist attention to self-reflective processes as formative. Unlike T.S. Eliot’s portrayal of disjunction and alienation as representative of modern life, Livesay presents critical awareness and self-knowledge as the basis of political organization and action. Workers here are not portrayed as heroes. The
narrator has been “raised up” in place of his Black comrade. The workers are not portrayed as heroes, nor is their work uplifting. They are caught in an inhuman industrial hell, divided one from another by hate-filled bosses. Yet they are also human beings. And on the basis of their shared working-class families, “An understanding about kids at home,” they become buddies. If they truly grasp their fate in an inhuman system, and work to overthrow it, they may become something more than “buddies” — they might become, like Shadrach, Meschach and Abednego, exemplars of the world’s new, redemptive faith.

From 1935 Livesay renewed her commitment to poetry — her own poetry — as a legitimate mode of political involvement, a contribution in which her particular skills and abilities were key. In 1933 Louis Kon, the Montreal head of the Friends of the Soviet Union, had urged Livesay to focus on her poetry, assuring her that her contribution to the movement lay in her literary ability. It took Livesay some time to accept that it was as a poet, not an organizer, that she was most politically effective.

***

Livesay returned to Toronto in the Fall of 1935, to a movement in which she had a respected place. Her experiences in the U.S., her class background, and especially her association with Jean Watts and Lon Lawson, all combined to place her at the centre of fledgling developments and directions in the Party’s cultural work. Reports of the Seventh International CI Congress in early August 1935 appeared in The Worker throughout August and September of 1935. Members

515 For an incisive analysis of the poem’s invocation of the extreme racial violence and lynching, see Pamela McCallum, “‘They Cut Him Down’: Race, Class, and Cultural Memory in Dorothy Livesay’s ‘Day and Night,’” in Di Brandt and Barbara Godard, eds. Wider Boundaries of Daring: The Modernist Impulse in Canadian Women’s Poetry (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2009), 191-212.
517 Dorothy Livesay, RHLH, 101.
supported the re-orientation to the struggle against fascism. In their day-to-day work in the trade union and unemployed movements, activists and organizers began to emphasize the common goals of leftists and moved away from their earlier sectarianism. This transition to the Popular Front had a decisive impact on Livesay's work. Entailing a commitment to the involvement of poetry in everyday matters, political and personal, it led Livesay to a way of seeing her poetic mission that would stay with her much of the rest of her life.

By 1936, it was possible to say and to do new things within the CPC. The boundaries of legitimate Communist discourse on culture had been extended. Once everything had revolved around a primordial class-against-class struggle. Now issues that were more loosely associated with class — such as those related to housing, children, peace and health — could be raised with confidence. Once poets had felt constrained to echo the staccato rhythms and terse themes of agitprop. Now it was possible to explore a broad range of modernist literary techniques. (After all, Stephen Spender and Cecil Day-Lewis, both members of the CPGB, had shown that poets, even privileged poets, could put modernist literary technique to good political purpose). By a harsh irony, this new Popular Front openness was combined with an intensified Canadian identification with the Soviet regime. The murder of Kirov in December 1934 plunged the workers' state into an accelerating process of state terror, one of whose manifestations was the demand that its foreign supporters emphasize even more their commitment to the defence of the Soviet Union as a socialist homeland. For readers of Popular Front publications and audiences of Popular Front meetings in Canada, the result could be CPC presentations that stressed, on the one hand, alliance-building in defence of a host of progressive initiatives, and on the other, unblinking adherence to the processes underway in the Soviet Union, including the persecution of Trotsky and the elimination of most of the front ranks of the Old Bolsheviks.
Livesay lived this time as one of enormous creativity and renewal. The liberating core of thirties modernism was the drive to remake culture anew, to reject the false surface coherence, stifling traditionalism, and contrived harmonies of conventional aesthetic representations. Livesay spent the winter of 1934-5 reading this ‘new literature’ and preparing talks on it. No longer the alienated critic, she took up the new poetry as a way of giving authentic voice to an unprecedented time. The rekindling of her interest in poetry in 1935 had been sparked by Day-Lewis’s assertion in his 1935 poetry collection, *A Time To Dance*, of love and passion as primary elements of political change. After Fall 1935, Livesay’s poetry focused on the persistence of love in the face of oppression and inequality. “[W]e are living in a time of transition,” Livesay wrote in 1936, describing “what modern poets are attempting.” Such poets shared with all their great predecessors — Livesay pays homage to Horace, Dante, and “the creative catalogist, Walt Whitman” — the imperative need to combine the “three functions of the poet,” those related to formal expression, philosophical content, and emotional value. All three functions were intimately related and could only be arbitrarily separated. All three went together “to create in the hearer a sensation of identity with others, and to release in him an individual creative comprehension.” What was new in the 1930s was the drive to identify with the powerful, positive new energies of the working class. The new poets were concerned to identify themselves with those forces in society which are working towards human development and expansion, as opposed to other groups, identified with capitalism, which are seeking to hold the clock back. That is the general philosophical direction. To those who still cling to the more static conception of society such poetry is ‘propaganda.’ Fifty years hence it will not seem so, and the critics will again have time to concern themselves with the highly varied individual differences between poets who are now lumped together as being ruined by the ‘collectivist complex.’

---

518 Dorothy Livesay, “Poet’s Progress,” *New Frontier*, 2, 2 (June 1937).
In the 1920s, Livesay had hoped to see the hypocrisy and cant of present society “swept away” in one great wave. Here, radiant with a poetic and revolutionary energy, was that wave.

As we have seen, there had been many signs from mid-1934 on that the CPC was more than ready to soften the extreme sectarianism of the Third Period -- Dimitrov’s Seventh Congress speech was plainly “leading” the Canadian Party down a path it was ready to follow. In the second half of 1935, the new direction became unmistakable across the CPC’s cultural activities -- and it can be discerned in Livesay’s poetry. Earlier she had placed emphasis on the horrors of the Depression for working-class families suffering its worst effects. In her post-1935 work Livesay foregrounds the working-class family in her poetry and narrative writing as a positive refuge of love, care and compassion. The working-class family is the nursery of those who will be nemesis of the bourgeois order. Leo Kennedy caught some of this new emphasis when he hailed a poetry that would be “real, Canadian and contemporary.” Yesterday poets might have expatiated on their “precious egos” and their “dreams”; but today, these same poets might write more vigorous work, words that would be “welcomed by millions of Canadians who want their children to grow up straight-limbed to enjoy a heritage of prosperity and peace, and who want the kind of writing that will help bring this about.” Of course the poetry of the Popular Front must attack the existing order: “We need satire, -- fierce, scorching, aimed at the abuses which are destroying our culture and which threaten life itself...” Yet what was also needed was a “poetry that reflects the lives of our people, working, loving, fighting, groping for clarity.”519

In her earlier (Third Period) poems, Livesay consistently spoke in the voice of the girl worker or the working-class wife and mother. Now in the period of the Popular Front, as we see in “Day and Night,” she spoke from a position aligned with,

but not explicitly mandated by, the Party and its line. There is a shift to the perspective of the young male worker. Livesay now had sufficient confidence in her position and in her stance within poetry — one solidified with the help of Spender, Auden, and Day-Lewis — to speak outside the role of “Communist Woman” earlier assigned her. She too was capable of saying universal truths, in the world vocabulary of Communism. Her authority was now rooted in a bourgeois notion of the writer, a notion that informed Livesay’s ambivalent relation to conventional ideas on womanhood, working class and bourgeois. She could now assume a voice independent of the Party, of her peers, even of her gender. But at the same time Livesay increasingly depicted and deployed conventional notions of womanhood and gender in her writing for the Party, in order to popularize and legitimate the Party’s political authority and the case for socialism.

A difficulty with Livesay’s descriptions of her political work in the 1930s is her failure to note the part played by the CPC in sponsoring and guiding the cultural work done by the PAC and other cultural groups. This is matched on the official side by the leadership’s oversight of cultural work in memoirs and official histories. Tellingly, in neither of her two major books of memoirs does Livesay so much as mention the Comintern nor the Seventh Congress. Livesay notes several times in *Right Hand Left Hand* and *Journey With My Selves* that she was a member of the CPC during the period of the united front policy, yet does not comment directly on the shift from the Third Period to the Popular Front. Whether she was aware of the recent endorsement by the Party leadership of an enhanced role for middle-class intellectuals and artists in the Party cannot be answered conclusively. Livesay’s only direct reference to the Party’s leadership or its role in cultural work is a brief point in *Right Hand Left Hand* that she does not consider herself to have been “duped” by the Party, a comment that provoked objection from some of Livesay’s comrades in the CPC. Her memoirs give little sense of the substance of the Party’s influence on
Livesay’s cultural work. Yet this influence was significant, and can be seen clearly in the direction — and changes in direction — that cultural work by members took, and in Livesay’s case, in the differences between the poetry and criticism she published in *Masses* and *New Frontier*.

As Livesay tells the story, she as an individual found her own aesthetic and moral reasons for undergoing her literary re-birth in the mid-1930s. In all of her post-1934 cultural work she was profoundly attuned to the needs of the CPC, which was overjoyed to have a progressive middle-class woman, a respected poet, advancing its new inclusive line. Livesay thus offers evidence and inspiration for both the “revisionist” and “traditionalist” readings of the “cultural front” of the 1930s — and, in so doing, perhaps suggests their limitations. The Popular Front was neither fully indigenous nor externally imposed, but always a fertile combination of Soviet and North American influences. Livesay, once the poet laureate of the Third Period in Canada, now became one of the Popular Front’s most powerful and enduring voices, whose poems in aid of it are still current today.

***

Livesay’s transition from the Third Period to the Popular Front was paralleled in her personal life by a movement away from alienated isolation and towards a more full-hearted identification with the movement. Some of her isolation in the U.S., racially- and class-inflected as it doubtless was, also reflected a sense of cultural aloofness from a movement with which she identified but with which she was not yet fully taken up. In the Third Period especially, women members were expected to adapt to a highly masculinist political culture, in which hardened revolutionaries put their personal feelings to one side and subordinated everything to political imperatives. This style of work isolated Livesay, and along with her disappointments
in relationships with men, very likely contributed to the personal breakdown culminating in her return to Toronto. A masculinist vanguardist style, in which women were asked to set their personal feelings to one side, was aligned with men who were only too willing to sideline their own personal feelings as they pursued sexual conquests and personal advantages, as Livesay herself had experienced when she learned of her New York comrade-lover’s engagement.

News of Livesay’s retreat to Woodlot spread among her friends and fellow party members. Another Canadian Livesay knew from the University of Toronto, Ross Parmenter, had moved to New York City in 1934, to work as a city reporter for the *New York Times*. In October 1935 he wrote to Livesay at her parents’ home, apologizing for not seeing more of her during the year past. It was not, he explained, because he didn’t like her, or because she was “unsatisfactory.” Instead, he wrote,

> [b]eing with you made me uncomfortable. You yourself never did anything to make me feel that way. It was — well, I guess, it was your character. I weighed myself against you and I felt not only that you were finer than I, but also that I was a pretty poor thing. You were, as it were, my own conscience and I was a bit uneasy in its presence...I have been wanting to write this to you for some time — to ask you not to feel hurt at my neglect and to assure you it was not due to any failing of yours.

Parmenter feared that his “meanness and selfishness,” his neglect of her feelings, may have contributed to Livesay’s breakdown. In October Livesay received another letter, this one from Lloyd York, a YCL comrade in Montreal, who had been Livesay’s lover. York begins his letter by telling Livesay that he had wanted to write before, because “[y]ou would keep popping up in my mind and lately, when I met some one from Toronto, I wouldn’t ask them about the movement in Toronto. No sir, the first question was always “have you seen Dee L --- lately or do you know

---


521 Livesay Fonds, Parmenter to Livesay, October 1935.
where she is.” York had run into a mutual friend, Bill Walsh, at a Friends of the Soviet Union meeting in Montreal: “I asked him the old question and bless his little heart he had heard that you were in Clarkson and that you were not well. So as soon as I got home I sat down and am doing something I have wanted to do for a long time.” Livesay had apparently written to York earlier in the summer. In jail for a month for his part in what he described as ‘the Hunger March to Ottawa,’ he had delayed responding. Now York, likely the father of the baby aborted by Livesay the previous year, shortly after her return to Toronto, tried to offer Livesay some comfort:

Life is a hell of a mess at times. I feel just like I should, a rotter, I think they are called. I hope you can understand that I never wanted this to turn out as it has. Perhaps we made a wrong decision, or perhaps circumstances prevented it, but whatever happened here we are. So what? “Wait! comes de revolucion”?
As ever, Lloyd.

At no point did Livesay regret her decision to have an abortion in 1934. She also did not deny its effect on her, acknowledging this in a poem written many years after, and referring to her abortion in her first memoir. Although theirs had been a ‘party’ relationship, their regard for one another, as friends and lovers as well as CPC members, is obvious. York writes: “I may have changed a bit (don’t we all?) Of course the movement is first last and in between. But spending a month in jail and everything I’ve gone through may have made me more serious or may I say...I mean philosophical (sic).”

Livesay too became more ‘philosophical’ in the face of her combined personal and political experiences. A privately-nursed revolutionary romanticism, one that was different in tone and atmosphere from the high masculinism of the Third Period, could emerge fully, and Livesay began to depict women in their roles at home. In her New Frontier reportage, the working-class family is re-imagined as the core of a

522 Livesay Fonds, Box 45, folder 17, Lloyd York to Dorothy Livesay, October 1935.
democratic progressive politics going beyond the immediacies of the class struggle. In the new CPC discourse Livesay was helping to craft, the working class was still represented as an ethically superior and politically efficacious force. After 1935, however, the feminine and the familial are a source of power in the imagined working class. Like the steelworkers in “Day and Night” finding solidarity in their talk of home and children, these working class family members fight to preserve what is best in life and to nurture the future.

The existing literature on Livesay often stresses the limitations she suffered because of CPC politics, and Livesay herself separates her Party commitment from her poetic and personal life. In this rendering, the first commitment was transitory, a CPC enthusiasm stemming from youthful naïveté; the second was lifelong, an attachment to a broader humanism and socialism. It is a separation worth reconsidering, because in fact the Third Period and Popular Front contexts were not the same, and the second palpably liberated Livesay’s poetic vision and gave her a much wider context in which to express it. *New Frontier* continued to champion the Soviet Union model and guide. It also, in greater part, asserted a new voice in Canadian letters and in Canadian politics. The Popular Front called for a creative and expansive role for the state in cultural and social life, and constituted a historic breakthrough for women, who as contributors, editors and managers, were no longer marginal but pivotal players.

The subsequent history of the Soviet Union and the Cold War meant that when activists such as Livesay constructed memoirs of their Depression-era leftism, they emphasized the anti-fascist, pro-unemployed dimensions of their commitment. They minimized the extent to which the CPC itself, with its changing cultural politics, shaped the context and much of the content of this commitment. They also made little of the extraordinary political education they received from the party circles they frequented – it is difficult to imagine “Day and Night,” for example,
without Livesay’s time in New Jersey and her affiliation with co-workers and Communists of colour.523 As an activist in the YCL, PAC and CPC, Livesay exemplified the Party’s new outreach to the middle class. From joining the YCL in 1932, to her work with thirty-odd other students, artists and intellectuals in the PAC, and then moving after 1934 into full Party membership and intensive involvement with New Frontier, Livesay underwent a transformation within the Party and its cultural orbit, before departing, as a married woman, in 1939. There were many other middle-class people in the 1930s, especially in Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg and Vancouver, who responded much as she did. Perhaps few others found the moment as empowering and as liberating as Livesay, who was able to turn the CPC’s new “family values” into a recipe for her own development as a writer.

523 Livesay credits her American friend “Scotty,” a Jewish Scot who arranged for Livesay to tour a steel mill in Newark, New Jersey. This inspired her poem, Day and Night. See Dorothy Livesay, JWMS, 150.
Chapter Six

“Every Waking Moment Promoting the Party”:
Jim Watts and the Cultural Front

For every hundred or so Canadians who know of Dorothy Livesay, perhaps just one has heard of Eugenia (Jean, Jim) Watts (b. 1909, d. 1968). Some today know of the fine portrait of her by Frederick Taylor, and others recall that she was the one woman to join the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion, the Canadian contribution to the revolutionary side of the Spanish Civil War. Yet within progressive circles in the 1930s, and among those with a deeper acquaintance with the CPC’s cultural work, Watts was a figure of equal, perhaps even greater, importance. She was instrumental in organizing the CPC’s work in theatre, a vital sparkplug for the Party’s newspapers as well as New Frontier, and one of its most outstanding Spanish correspondents. Perhaps Watts is remembered so fleetingly because she never fit comfortably into the CPC’s orbit, and has thus been denied official commemoration along the lines accorded Beckie Buhay and others of her contemporaries. This chapter examines Jean Watts’s involvement with the CPC over the period 1932 to 1939, as the CPC moved into the Popular Front Against Fascism. The simplest summary of her life is that she defied convention.

Watts was a highly committed and effective Communist. She believed wholeheartedly in the CPC’s leadership and accepted its political direction in all phases of 1930s Party life. Personal courage and class privilege enabled Watts to make a place for herself in the CPC, and she invested both herself and her resources in the construction of a socialist culture. Both modernist and traditionalist, Watts drew on a wide variety of influences, including contemporary poetry, social criticism and political essays. She believed in the rational understanding of social development and in systematic planning — she was very much a “scientific socialist” in her belief in
the possibilities of a general enlightenment of the human condition. Yet she also romanticized farming and dreamed of escaping modern urban life.

Watts was born in 1909 in Streetsville, Ontario. Little is known about her immediate family, except for the fact that she received a considerable inheritance from her grandfather, much of which she gave to friends and to the Communist cause she loved. Watts attended Glen Mawr School in Toronto’s Annex neighbourhood where, in 1922, she met Dorothy Livesay. In most of her memoirs and personal accounts, Livesay makes room for a discussion of Watts’s life and its impact upon her. The two shared a passion for literature and poetry and Watts clearly had an intellectual bent. As a teenager, she read George Bernard Shaw’s *Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism* and Engels’s *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. Watts was intellectually precocious and socially fearless. An atheist and a non-conformist, Watts wore masculine clothing and preferred the moniker ‘Jim’ to her birth name, Eugenia. Signs of her free-thinking disposition included her enthusiastic attendance at Emma Goldman’s lectures on Russian drama, women’s emancipation, modern education, and (most controversially) birth control in Toronto in the early spring of 1927. Despite a lack of academic preparation, she enrolled in the rigorous pre-medicine program at the University of Toronto. This proved an unfortunate decision. She dropped out early in her third year, suffering from a nervous breakdown, and was sent by her family to recuperate with relatives in Piedmont, California. When Watts returned to Toronto in the early summer of 1930 she had resolved both her occupational impasse and her personal crisis.

When she returned to university in the autumn of 1930 her courses were less onerous than those in the faculty of medicine. In the 1930-1931 academic year Watts took classes in psychology, German, philosophy and oriental literature. Watts (and Livesay) enjoyed their social and intellectual university life this year more than previously. Watts began an affair with Otto Van der Sprenkel, a young LSE graduate
and lecturer in political science. Van der Sprenkel contributed significantly to Watts’s political education and her interest in Soviet society and Marxist theory, one shared by a fair-sized group of friends, faculty and peers at the University of Toronto. With Van der Sprenkel and Stanley Ryerson, Watts took a hiking tour through Spain shortly after the proclamation of the Second Spanish Republic in April 1931. Watts’s relationship with Van der Sprenkel ended over the course of their travels in Europe that summer. She asked Dorothy Livesay to meet her in the South of France. Shortly after the two friends went to Paris, where Livesay was enrolled at the Sorbonne. Watts returned to Toronto early in September 1931, for her third year in psychology.

Back in Toronto, at the age of 22, Watts joined the YCL. As was the case with many new recruits, her decision to join the communist movement over the winter of 1931-1932 may have been prompted by the federal government’s remorseless prosecution of the Party, culminating in the November 1931 trial of Tim Buck and other CPC leaders. Over that winter Watts met Avrom Yanovsky, a young Jewish artist already well known in the Toronto labour movement for his illustrations for the Canadian Labour Defender, journal of the Canadian Labour Defence League (CLDL). Watts also encountered Toby Gordon and Oscar Ryan. Ryan was the publicity director for the CLDL and secretary of the YCL. Watts became a member of this intensely-committed group of YCL activists, and then a leader in the PAC’s theatre division. She was instrumental in the formation of the Workers’ Experimental Theatre (WET) in the spring of 1932. With her unorthodox combination of feminine and masculine demeanour and dress, Watts embraced the image and ethos of the rebel girl.

Watts finished her degree in psychology in the spring of 1933. In her last year at the University of Toronto, Watts and Stanley Ryerson organized the Student League of Canada, transforming the pre-existing Social Problems Club and the
Student League for Social Reconstruction into one of the most effective united front venues in Canada. When Ryerson went to Paris to study for a postgraduate degree at the Sorbonne, Watts remained in Toronto, a leading member of the PAC, the WET, the YCL, and business manager of the *Young Worker*. In the autumn of 1933 she played a key role in directing, staging, and acting in the PAC’s *Eight Men Speak*. Over this year she became involved with William Lawson, a fellow University of Toronto student and PAC member. In September 1934, Watts and Lawson moved to New York City, where Watts attended the New Theatre School and Lawson wrote articles for the Canadian *Worker* and studied New York’s progressive cultural movement. When they returned to Toronto in June 1935, Watts and Toby Gordon set up a drama school affiliated with the new Theatre of Action and Lawson began the groundwork for a new journal of progressive culture, *New Frontier*. Watts and Lawson were leaders of the Canadian Popular Front. Both were instrumental as CPC organizers, cultural producers, and in Watts’s case, financier of *New Frontier*, launched in April 1936.

Watts went to the Soviet Union in the autumn of 1935 for the Moscow Theatre Festival. When she returned to Toronto in December 1935 she began rehearsals for the first Canadian production of Clifford Odet’s *Waiting For Lefty*, the play that had announced the American Popular Front in December 1934. The play opened at the Margaret Eaton Hall at the end of February 1936, for three nights. In Summer, 1936 the Theatre of Action hired David Pressman, an American, to head the school, and in the following Autumn, hired Pressman to be the Theatre of Action’s permanent director. The successful premier of Irwin Shaw’s *Bury the Dead*, at the end of October 1936, marked the end of Watts’s day-to-day involvement with the Theatre of Action.

From this point Watts devoted herself to the campaign to support Republican Spain. She left for Spain, via France, in January 1937, and arrived in
Madrid in February, where she joined Norman Bethune’s Blood Transfusion Service. Watts’ first assignment in Spain was as a reporter for the *Daily Clarion*, and in this capacity she also made radio broadcasts to Canada from Madrid. In an interview with Victor Hoar, Watts described her role at the Blood Transfusion Institute as “a kind of public relations person. But my scope was as wide as I wanted.”\(^{524}\) She did odd jobs around the Canadian Blood Transfusion Institute. After several months in Spain Watts left the clinic for a job censoring foreign (English and French) correspondents’ reports for the Foreign Press and Propaganda Office of the Ministry of War.\(^{525}\) In the fall of 1937 Watts joined the International Brigades and was assigned to a stationary hospital attached to the British Battalion. She worked as a driver, of both ambulances and delivery trucks, and as a ‘grease monkey.’ In Madrid, Watts’s broadcasts to Canada brought her in contact with Herbert Kline, the American who made the short film, *Heart of Spain* for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). She assisted with the production of the film, and reported on its making in the *Daily Clarion*. After she joined the International Brigades in the fall of 1937 Watts did very little reporting. When she returned to Canada one year later, Watts worked as an organizer for the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion.

With the Republican defeat in the spring of 1939, Watts devoted herself to organizing support for Spanish refugees. She was in Vancouver at the end of a Western speaking tour for the Committee to Aid Spanish Refugees when the Second World War was announced on 3 September 1939. The following summer Lawson, Watts’s husband, joined CPC leaders Tim Buck, Sam Carr, Stanley Ryerson, and others in hiding, to avoid being interned under the Defense of Canada Regulations. Watts went with her husband to New York initially, but returned to

---


Canada, where she was closely monitored during this period, but not detained. She spent much of this period in Montreal. In April 1942 Lawson surrendered himself to the police, but after the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 the government was no longer concerned to intern Canadian communists. By the time Lawson and Watts were reunited in Toronto Watts was a member of the Canadian Women’s Army Corp. While in the army, Watts worked as a personnel officer. She was based in Kingston and Cornwall, Ontario. While there is no evidence that Watts ever disagreed with the CPC’s position on World War Two in its first phase, Watts’ support for the CPC’s turnaround and Canada’s active engagement in the war against Germany, Italy and Japan was complete.

***

Watts was instrumental in organizing and supporting progressive culture in Depression-era Canada, yet her own contributions to this culture have been largely overlooked. Those who have noticed them have often done so rather dismissively, seeing them as the product of a bourgeois with a bad conscience, a champagne socialist who dabbled in proletarian politics as a way of easing her troubled soul. When she is not marginalized as an eccentric, Watts is patronized as a well-meaning, and certainly well-funded, dupe. Yet she was a committed and loyal member of the CPC. The YCL and CPC put Watts to work that suited their aims, expecting her to tailor her efforts to suit political projects developed through the Third Period and the Popular Front Against Fascism. Watts complied. She remained a hard-working

526 Lawson did, however, spend time in the Don Jail, charged under Defence of Canada Regulations. His release was assisted by Premier Hepburn. See “Hepburn Act Typifies National Need: Lawson, Globe and Mail, 27 July 1942.” Lawson enlisted with the Canadian military shortly after his release. 527 See, for instance, Alan Filewod, “Performance and Memory in the Party: Dismembering the Workers’ Theatre Movement.” Essays on Canadian Writing 80 (Fall 2003): “[O]ne of the historical ironies about the workers’ theatre is that it was directly subsidized by its one refugee from bourgeois wealth, Jean “Jim” Watts...” (68).
member in good standing throughout the 1930s. Yet many descriptions of her in secondary sources fixate on her financial role in the movement, and ignore her larger contribution and endless hours of work. In large measure, they over-read Watts’s eccentricity.

I will make a case for understanding Watts’s work as a leading member of the CPC in light of her position as a progressive member of the Canadian middle class, and in light of her own intellectual, political and cultural interest in socialism and social equality. Watts’s decision to join the CPC (and the various forms of affiliation her membership entailed) was not a matter of chance, luck, privilege or misfortune. Her life and the course of her involvement with socialist culture in Canada, the U.S. and Europe, testify to Watts’s remarkable ability and commitment to political change and to her investment in the possibility of an egalitarian world.

As Chapter Seven will show, Livesay and Watts were in some respects both examples of Canadian middle-class women who followed their hearts and minds into Communism in the 1930s -- and hence their sometimes intense, sometimes agonistic relationship with one another. In many respects, Watts was Livesay’s antithesis. Where Livesay was an intellectual, to the point of intellectualizing even the events of her daily life, Watts was both an intellectual and an organizer, a specialist in “social protest.” Arguably, Watts was more crucial to the CPC’s cultural experiments in the Depression Era than Livesay. Through talent, persistence and confrontation, Livesay made a mark on the world that has remained legible beyond her death. Watts’s mark is only now beginning to be recovered. This recuperation involves sifting through others’ memoirs, piecing together the context(s) in which Watts worked, and studying the documents she left behind -- pictures, letters, articles, memberships. In the past several years, interest in her has been slowly mounting.528

528 The first person to write on Jean Watts Lawson was Joan Sangster. Larry Hannant has written on Watts’s experience in the Spanish Civil War. Andrée Lévesque has expressed interest in Watts as a fascinating figure, but has so far not written on her. See Joan Sangster, Dreams of Equality: Women on
Canada once again identified with the repression of radical opinion, Watts is emerging as an increasingly relevant voice from the past.

I read Jim Watts's life and work as an effort to achieve a critical synthesis, a practical politics informed not only by Marx and Marxism, the CPC and the Party line, but as importantly by art (in its broadest sense) and culture. In her engagement with these elements, Watts was more than a leading party figure and did more than follow CPC protocols. Prominent as a Communist before the Popular Front period, she came into her own during it. In this period Watts was not following the Party but leading it.

Watts was not a typical female party member. She followed the style of the “rebel girl” (made famous by Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, and popularized by Amelia Earhart), complete with bobbed blonde hair, a leather jacket and heavy boots. Yet Watts’s predilection for masculine clothing predated her membership in the CPC. According to Livesay, as a young girl, Watts bound her chest and wore boy’s underclothes. Her style changed over time, but remained a central, provocative aspect of how she operated socially and politically. In the early 1930s it matched Watts’s deepening radicalization. Jim Watts identified as a Communist and her feminism was part of this larger political framework, a more encompassing platform from which to work against inequality. Watts's financial support of CPC-related organizations and venues made possible an ambitious program of cultural activism that would not have existed without her. But her contribution went far beyond the

---


39 “What I remember is extreme nervousness in the presence of boys. However, we admired their firm, straight bodies and in order to look the same we strapped our budding breasts under tight cotton ‘brazeers.’ And I recollect my shock when you went so far as to wear only boys’ striped cotton shorts instead of rayon panties.” Livesay, JWMS, ’62.
financial. Her role in these projects was crucial to their survival and success. She was a catalyst for some of the CPC’s most effective work, particularly in theatre.

As a wealthy, married, bisexual woman who had occasional affairs, Watts practised a form of sexual modernity some in the Party approached but few equalled. Her activism in the Party coincided with the period in which it aggressively asserted sexual orthodoxy and conventional morality. Small wonder that she has remained obscure in the CPC’s chronicles, unlike Beckie Buhay, Bella Hall Gauld and Annie Buller. Her story does not fit the sort of gender narrative the CPC endorsed. That Watts embraced no single role or identity as definitive, with respect to her sense of self, her work, and her place in the Communist movement, ensured that the CPC did not claim her as representative. Yet Watts’s class background, her knowledge of bourgeois culture, and her unfixedness also made her a particularly valuable mediator for the Party during the Popular Front. In the mid-1930s the Party wanted to appeal to the middle class, and used images of women to do so. Paradoxically, Watts’s ambiguous gender status and appearance may have worked to open doors for the Party that would otherwise have been closed. Her very boyishness could be interpreted as a businesslike professionalism. If someone as attractive, articulate, individualistic, prosperous and competent as Watts was in the CPC, could it be such a menace? Watts’s own fluid identity very likely made her sensitive to the ways in which languages of exclusion operated in social and political contexts -- and thereby more skilled in finding ways in which the CPC’s message could be made more palatable to the broad masses the Party wanted to attract in the era of the Popular Front.

Watts had a remarkable impact on those who knew her, especially those she worked closely with. For Toby Gordon Ryan, Watts made an invaluable contribution to workers’ theatre. “Workers’ Theatre was a truly collective effort, pooling all the creative resources we had,” she writes. “One person, though, stood out for her drive
and commitment to this social theatre – Jim Watts.” Gordon Ryan quotes Watts’s close friend and associate Jocelyn Moore:

Jim was terribly attractive to everybody, not only in a feminine way. Men were always falling in love with her, but women liked her too, although they tended to shy away from her a little because she was different from other girls. She had so much of everything. I don’t mean just money, but personality and looks and drive. She was strong in her convictions, but with an underlying insecurity too. The two were very much intertwined in her personality.530

Ryan’s account of the left theatre scene expunges its affiliation with the CPC. In this dissertation, I insist on seeing Watts as a Communist, and the PAC, the Theatre of Action, and the Daily Clarion as among her most important contexts, all of them tied closely to the Party. I see Watts as someone who was particularly affected by the shift from the Third Period to the Popular Front, a transition that allowed her to move from a cultural politics emphasizing class against class to one that allowed her to draw upon her considerable training and strengths in mainstream cultural fields. In this new framework, culture itself, especially Canadian culture, could be construed as an emancipatory project.

Watts unquestionably lived a privileged life, and her financial contributions to Party initiatives have been often cited. This conjures up an image of a young woman wealthy enough to “give away” her inheritance in support of radical politics. We may approve of this as noble or criticize it as frivolous, but neither response helps us to understand Watts herself. The details of how she lived reveal much more. Watts wittily referred to her wealth as “my unearned increment,” applying a phrase from Single Tax advocate Henry George to her own personal circumstances.531 She was renowned for her generosity. She maintained an apartment near the University of Toronto campus that was always open to visitors. Ryan remembered it was

531 Ibid. The source is Jocelyn Moore, a close friend from her university days.
“tastefully and comfortably furnished” and recalled the hospitality as well as the “important discussions and dreams for the future” on offer there. Her financial contributions were vital and well-chosen: Toby Ryan points out that it was Watts who rented and paid for the first office the Workers’ Theatre occupied, at 989 Bay Street.532

It is possible to arrive, via Livesay’s memoirs and Watts’s scattered letters and pieces of journalism, at a fuller portrait of her.533 Watts was not in fact spectacularly wealthy. She managed her money carefully and lived very frugally. Dorothy Livesay has described Watts’s early intellectualism, her openness to rethinking and her efforts to integrate new ideas into how she lived:

That was the kind of person Jim Watts was – always alert to new ideas, and I was very much the follower. She kept exploring everything. She delved into books on sex and trial marriage and so on, long before I did, and told me all about them. She got particularly interested in politics, philosophy and psychology. We were both interested in women as creative and were mad about poets like H.D., Emily Dickinson, Elinor Wylie and just daft about Katherine Mansfield.534

In 1937 the publication of Alick West’s Crisis and Criticism (reviewed by Lon Lawson in the Daily Clarion) reinforced Watts’s belief in the importance of art and literature as venues of revolutionary action. West’s writing on literature – along with Corey’s Crisis of the Middle Class – informed Watts’s approach to cultural work during the Popular Front. The Popular Front gave Watts an opportunity to bring her convictions about art, politics, class and culture to bear upon her work in the Theatre of Action and as a journalist. These were beliefs she had developed as a student member of a radical intellectual community centered on the University of

532 Ryan, Stage Left, 33.
533 All three of Livesay’s attempts at memoir deal with Watts. Livesay acknowledges that her account of Watts is shaped by her own intentions and evasions. Consequently it must be read critically, in tandem with the few letters written by Watts that are available, along with her journalism.
534 Dorothy Livesay, RHLH, 21-22.
Toronto. In the Popular Front, Watts worked as a member of the CPC, but also as a fierce partisan of a broader movement for socialism.

***

In her 1996 memoir, *Journey With My Selves*, Dorothy Livesay recounts the personal crisis Watts suffered in the fall of 1929. In the summer of 1929 Watts had begun an affair with a fellow counselor she met in her job at a youth camp near Bolton, Ontario, north of the city. This first lesbian relationship was apparently tumultuous and ended badly. In spite of the heavy workload of her pre-medicine program, Watts continued to have affairs with women (although she tried to be more measured in her conduct) when she returned to university. Livesay describes the deterioration of their friendship over this period (1928-29): “In campus you were going around with a known lesbian crowd. True, they were not regarded with the same sense of taboo associated with ‘fairies’ -- our name for homosexuals ... In any case, *The Well of Loneliness* was the book, yet it did not help me accept your new role. This caused a rift.”

In their second year Livesay was living at St. Hilda’s, the female residence attached to Trinity College. Watts was living in a building known on campus as the Old Elm, which had a restaurant as well as renting out rooms to students. The two had been extremely close in their first year. In reaction to Watts’s same-sex love affairs, Livesay pulled away completely, and strenuously avoided Watts, even in her diary. Their rift was healed over the following winter, in a series of letters between them commencing in February 1930, when Watts was in California and Livesay in Aix-en-Provence. Watts’s observations in the letters she wrote to Livesay over these months illustrate the conflicts and controversies she was suffering, but also testify to a faith in her own views, the strength of her feelings, and

---

the depth of her heterodoxy, both political and sexual. Watts was coming to grips with a sexual identity whose implications were both compelling and frightening.

Watts’s letters to Livesay between January and April of 1930 give us insight into her desires, finances, friends, and plans. In March Watts writes that she does not know what she will or should do, only that her family is set on her “getting educated” and against her taking up agriculture. Of the present, she wrote, “I must go places and get orientated (a biological term) before next September, for I haven’t the remotest conception of what to do with my existence.” In closing, she wrote: “Thank god you won’t become a literary person, but its (sic) hard for a woman isn’t it” and signs herself “Thy poetaster.” Watts was clear on one thing: she did not want to be a typical woman.536 In this same letter she writes: “It’s funny, all the things I’ve done, to the consternation of all good people, and the tremendous amount of enjoyment I’ve got out of it. If I were a man, I should imitate Frederick Grove.”537

It was a surprising choice, given Watts’s impressively modern capacity for self-analysis and her openness to the most recent findings in psychological science. Yet Watts admired Grove and his example in part because he was a man, and also because his life and writing were evocative of a rustic romanticism. In his writing and public appearances Grove tapped into social anxieties about modernity and offered simplified and deeply romanticized accounts of rural life. Grove had moved from Europe first to the United States and then to Manitoba in 1912. He farmed – unsuccessfully – in the U.S., and when he moved to Canada he taught in rural schools and became well-known as a writer on Prairie life and community. In 1929 he moved to a farm in Ontario, where he supported himself as a full-time novelist and popular lecturer. In his work Grove celebrated the wilderness and natural forces, was critical of modern industrial society, and opposed to the mechanization of agriculture. He

536 Livesay Fonds, Watts to Livesay, 3 March 1930.
537 Watts was floundering: “I haven’t the remotest conception of what to do with my existence - the family being all for my getting educated and all against agriculture. Hell! Dee, why can’t I sculp?” Livesay Fonds, Watts to Livesay, 3 March 1930.
figures as one of Canada’s leading critics of modern industrial society. His writing likely influenced Watts’s interest in agriculture as an avenue to ennobling work and a simpler life.\footnote{538 See Desmond Pacey, Fiction 1920–1940, in Carl F. Klinck, Literary History of Canada, Canadian Literature in English (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), 679–683. Watts could not have known that Grove was literally self-made, a man who invented pseudonyms and shed past lives in pursuit of greater authenticity, but also to escape a history of debt and divorce.} To Watts, Grove epitomized the integration of the rustic and the deeply literate.

Class privilege enabled Watts to realize many of her dreams; it did not account for the dreams themselves. Watts identified strongly with men and with masculinity. She identified with men as scholars,\footnote{539 Watts’s mention of Harcourt Brown in an earlier letter was a reference to the necessity of achieving one’s objectives and doing things how and as one was able. Brown had begun studies at University College after working at a bank for three years. While getting a BA and MA in Modern Languages, he supported himself by working as a librarian at Hart House, and then as a drama and music critic. Brown went on to earn his PhD from Columbia University and to teach the history of science. He taught at Queen’s from 1926 to 1929. Watts may not have known him personally, but she certainly admired his life. Their attitudes toward learning and culture were similar, and each saw art and science as closely linked. According to Brown’s obituary, he “took a cultural/intellectual history approach to science and literature, maintaining that scientists were as much humanists as were literati, bankers, musicians, and the like.” See Robert E. Scholfield, “Eloge, Harcourt Brown, 30 May 1900–17 November 1990,” Isis, 83 : 2 (1992) 286–287.} artists and writers (and from 1932, as workers), and admired competence and independence. Watts’s wealth also gave her a degree of independence from conventional family patterns. She used her money to gain autonomy from her birth family, and managed her affairs carefully to safeguard her independence. An allowance from her family provided just enough money if she lived frugally. Watts’s parents, while well off, did not possess great wealth. Information on the source of Watts’s inheritance comes from Dorothy Livesay’s first memoir, Right Hand Left Hand. Here she mentions that the money to finance New Frontier, the Popular Front journal of social and cultural commentary Watts’s husband Lon Lawson started in 1936, came directly from Watts’s inheritance from her entrepreneurial grandfather.\footnote{540 The peculiarities of Watts’s family finances were illustrated by the fact that in order to sustain her own spending priorities, she considered selling the family silver, and went so far as to consult her lawyer on this possibility. According to her letters, both Jim and her brother resorted as necessary to legal action against their parents in order to procure the money left to them by their grandfather.} Although her parents lived in the city, before she was twenty-one Watts was living in her own rooms, close to the university campus. Just after Watts returned to Toronto from California at the beginning of
April, 1930, she wrote to Livesay: “...you don’t seem to realize that I’m not going to be one of those artistic dabblers, on the contrary [I] am all set for a continuation of scientific pursuits.” One month before Watts had described herself as lost; now she was enjoying a new direction for her ambition and a busy social life. Livesay had urged Watts to meet her in Europe, but Watts eventually decided to stay put in Toronto. She needed to save her money for the coming year, and couldn’t “afford to waste her substance” learning Italian with Livesay in Europe. At all costs Watts wanted to avoid moving back in with her family in Toronto. That, she wrote to Livesay, “would be bloody awful!”

By this point, Watts had committed herself to switching from medicine to psychology. Preparatory to entering at the second-year level, she began to read psychology texts. In Freud’s *Three Essays on Sexuality*, Watts found a name for herself. In a letter to Livesay written just after her return to Toronto, Watts tells Livesay that she had learnt

...in the course of psychological reading, that I am not homosexual, but bisexual, a condition very common, apparently among the greeks (sic) - Plato and Socrates etc. It was not then considered, and probably is not essentially abnormal at all, but has come to be considered so for reasons which would be interesting to find. But be of good cheer, for I am, even to your discerning eye, in no way abnormal, and having rather a jolly time in the first rush of being home.

Watts’s comment about Livesay’s discerning eye was in response to Livesay’s advice that Watts repress her desire for “people like her,” and her suggestion that Watts was suffering from an unhealthy repression of her heterosexuality. Livesay even suggested that Watts should marry, in order, presumably, to allow her

---

541 Livesay Fonds, Watts to Livesay, 7 April 1930.
542 Ibid.
heterosexuality to fully develop. Watts responded that if she were to marry, it could only be to a “feminine” man.543

The psychological concepts of repression and suppression helped Watts and Livesay negotiate their emerging sexualities. Livesay had written to Watts about her relationship with a young woman, Agnes, daughter of the family with whom Livesay boarded in Aix-en-Provence. Agnes had declared her love for Livesay, and pressed Livesay to begin a physical relationship. Watts wrote to Livesay: “it was very nice of you to be strong and suppress it, Dee. But then you were always like that. How I love you. Will you read ‘The Well of Loneliness’ which presents the problem in an altogether different light? I’m not sure that scientists would agree, but it’s very well-done -- emotional energy quite extraordinary.” Yet Livesay’s response to Agnes was not entirely under her control, apparently. Watts asks her: “Why did you faint, and above all, have hysterics?” Livesay’s confidence to Watts about Agnes’s sexual overture brought the two of them closer together for the time being. In her letter to her friend, Watts explained her own relationships with women. Watts was anxious that Livesay not underestimate the depth and importance of her physical attraction to members of her own sex. As she explained,

Do you understand that with ann (sic) there is that tremendous physical factor, but also friendship. I took damn good care there was something more than in my affair with Clarissa, which is a perfect example of pure passion. That is why no one was ever able to understand my interest in her - it was only explainable through that inexplicable physical attraction. But I didn’t want that horrible experience again, so that, when Anne (sic) and I do come to an end of passion, we will still be friends.545

543 Livesay Fonds, Watts to Livesay, 3 March 1930.
544 Livesay Fonds, Watts to Livesay, 12 March 1930.
545 Livesay Fonds, Watts to Livesay, 13 March 1930. The two remained lifelong friends. After she was married to Lon Lawson, Watts and Lawson purchased a part of Ann Farwell and Jeanne Minhinnick’s farm in Prince Edward County. They built a small cottage on South Bay, and lived there from the late 1940s to 1951. Even there they were under RCMP surveillance.
Watts, by the Spring of 1930, had, with the aid of social scientists, sexologists, psychologists, and her own considerable intelligence, made considerable headway in sorting out her own sexuality and laying the foundation for her further education.

In her letters to Livesay, Watts referred occasionally to ideas in psychology, for instance commenting on behaviourism as an “admirable trend.” But more often her letters mention literary advances and prominent cultural figures of the day, such as Gertrude Stein. She jumps from recommending poets, such as Elinor Wylie and H.M. Tomlinson, to news and gossip about friends, to thoughts about her alternative future paths. Watts was also becoming interested in Communism. The last letter she wrote to Livesay in Aix-en-Provence turned to politics, specifically the radical politics they had been discussing since 1927, when they attended Emma Goldman’s lectures in Toronto: “Of course I realize that communism kills liberty but what on earth do people do with liberty when they have it except use it to bind themselves up with [?]”

When they returned to the University of Toronto in the fall of 1930, Watts and Livesay joined a social group that included radical students and progressive faculty members, such as E.K. Brown, Felix Walter, and Barker and Margaret Fairley. Livesay has portrayed this period in considerable detail in her memoirs, poetry, and public talks. In Journey With My Selves, her last memoir, she describes this year as the period in which she and Watts embraced both Marxism and heterosexuality.

At the time of the 1931 arrest and conviction of eight top CPC members, news of which spread around the western world, Watts was living in the Spadina/College neighbourhood, close to the YCL national office at 274 College. Nearby lived Avrom Yanovsky (known professionally simply as “Avrom”), whose cartoons were a popular feature of the Canadian Labour Defender, the CLDL’s major

---

546 Livesay Fonds, Watts to Livesay, 6 May 1930.
publication, and who figured prominently in the YCL and the PAC. Through Avrom, Watts met Toby Gordon, recently returned from studying theatre at the Artef in New York City. Over that year Watts became involved with the Young Communist League (YCL), the CLDL, and the Progressive Arts Club (PAC). Watts was undoubtedly radicalized by Buck’s trial and conviction, and the organizations she had just joined became increasingly important to the Communist movement as a whole with the outlawing of the Party.

Watts’s university milieu was equally inflamed over the suppression of the Communists, a state action that allowed the Party to appeal to a broader constituency on the basis of the Bennett government’s seeming indifference to civil rights. A party hitherto attractive mainly to immigrants was generating sympathy amongst native-born students and young workers, especially in the big cities. The conviction brought unprecedented public attention to Section 98 of the criminal code and the issue of civil rights generally in Canada. An upsurge of public interest in and support for the CPC was informed and led by A.E. Smith and the CLDL. On December 12th the Young Worker carried a story titled “Varsity Students Endorse the Soviet Union” in which a new campus organization, the Student League for Social Reconstruction, was hailed as signaling an important shift in student opinion:

A surprise and a shock came to the self-satisfied bourgeoisie and reactionary conservatives of Toronto when the students of the University of Toronto at a debate refused to accept a resolution stating “that this house deplores the existence of Soviet Russia.” The resolution was voted down by 301 to 143 ... At the same meeting the students supported by [a] still larger vote, a motion calling for Repeal of Section 98 of the Criminal Code under which eight Communist leaders were found guilty, and sentenced to five years jail.

547 For general background, see Dominique Clément, Canada’s Rights Revolution: Social Movements and Social Change (Vancouver and Toronto: UBC Press, 2009).
The writer called “upon the student youth all over the country to join hands with the working and farming youth in common action against Section 98.”

At a distance, that someone like Watts would gravitate to a party like the CPC may seem surprising. Her adherence to the Party took place when it was in the throes of its most extreme ‘Third Period’ sectarianism. One of its leading slogans was “class against class.” It denounced compromisers, social democrats, reformists, and especially the heartless bourgeoisie. Watts, with her moneyed background, dissident views on sexuality, and Anglo-Saxon heritage, might seem from this perspective to be a person the CPC would have more normally denounced, and the Party one that she would have avoided. Yet the campaign of anti-Communist state repression launched in Canada, one unusually vigorous in world terms, set in motion a wave of sympathy for the Party. Many seemingly unlikely middle-class recruits joined the Party precisely when it was most adamantly insisting upon Third Period orthodoxies. With members such as Watts and, as of Summer, 1932, Stanley Ryerson, descendant of Egerton Ryerson, legendary pillar of the Toronto establishment and founder of the province’s educational system, the Party could claim the beginnings of a middle-class base in Canada’s second-largest city.

Their new-found interest in Communist politics drew Watts and Livesay closer together. In Fall, 1932, they shared an apartment close to the university. Livesay had enrolled in the School of Social Work’s two-year training program; Watts was in her final year of a degree in psychology. Watts’s interest in this relatively young field (at least in the context of this university) was undoubtedly informed by her own crisis of identity in 1929-30. It also reflected the public interest and debate that different schools of psychology were provoking at the time. Interest in psychology, from Freudian to behavioural, was especially marked on university campuses. Despite the fact that Watts had found the key to her own sexuality in

548 “Varsity Students Endorse the Soviet Union,” *Young Worker*, 12 December 1931, 5.
Freud’s work, it was in behavioural psychology that she encountered the ideas that shaped her political work as a member of the CPC.

Both Watts and Livesay were influenced by the charismatic Stanley Ryerson. While Watts shared the intensity of his political commitment, this was almost alarming to Livesay: “I shall have to be satisfied with the Marxian attitude as an approach, not as action,” she wrote one friend. “With Tony [Ryerson] it is wholly action, he is so busy I doubt if he will get any scholarship. His whole energy is turned violently in one direction. I don’t know what will happen to him.” Livesay was bothered by the frenetic pace of Watts’s and Ryerson’s activism in the fall of 1932: “Peace is after all essential: and Jim and Tony are the reverse of peaceful. Rationalization! But it’s fairly true, by god.”

The two did indeed set a whirlwind pace. During and after her work on her psychology degree, Watts was active in the WET (which changed its name to the Workers’ Theatre in November of 1932), in the Student League of Canada (she became the secretary of the SCL) and in the YCL. She also became business manager of the Young Worker. In October 1932, both she and Ryerson were instrumental in re-organizing the Student League for Social Reconstruction into the Student League of Canada; the new organization was placed on a satisfactory “united front” footing in line with CPC policy. Both of them made political work their priority, Watts as a performing member of the WET, organizer for the SLC, and YCLer, Ryerson as student organizer for the SLC and political organizer for the WUL and the YCL. 

That they each managed to graduate in May of 1933 is remarkable.

Watts focused more and more on CPC cultural work. Her often overlooked contribution is well worth noting. With Toby Gordon (later Toby Ryan), Watts founded the Workers’ Experimental Theatre (WET) early in 1932. From the PAC’s beginnings, workers’ theatre was the busiest and best-known element of its work.

549 Livesay, JWMS, 58-9.
550 Claims that Ryerson was never a member of the YCL seem open to question.
Over time, Watts’s role in the WET and its successor, the Workers’ Theatre (WT), ensured that the Student League of Canada and the progressive theatre movement were closely aligned. They not only shared many common ideas but also many common members. Watts freely drew on SLC membership lists when the WT mounted productions; the WT in turn supported the organizing work of the SLC. The networks and friendships Livesay, Ryerson and Watts — especially Watts — established during the early 1930s were of enduring importance later on. They ultimately played into the university students’ significant role in the Popular Front.

Even in the years before 1935, the connections Watts was helping build at the height of the CPC’s Third Period presaged the Popular Front that followed it. The youth/student and theatre movements into which Watts and Ryerson threw their energy were closely affiliated with the Communists, but they were never defined or dominated by the Party.\footnote{In contrast, as we have seen, the virtual liquidation of Custance’s women’s work after 1929 meant that the women’s organizations were far more directly subordinated to the Party apparatus.} (This was, perhaps, partly a serendipitous outcome of the CPC leadership’s imprisonment, which lengthened the odds against it thoroughly dominating the Communist movement). Watts and Ryerson were in a strong sense “Party people.” They were also linking semi-autonomous organizations that were to be important for a wider campaign against state repression — in a sense, a Popular Front in embryo, influenced but not dominated by the Party. When Watts organized a theatre evening in support of the SLC, or when Ryerson published articles in *Masses* exploring the centrality of educational and cultural work for working-class empowerment, they were linking causes, issues and people in ways significantly broader than those implied by a strict reading of class-against-class Third Period orthodoxy. And throughout this period, these Toronto activists were inspired by models of cultural activism acquired, indirectly or first-hand, in New York City.

As we explored in Chapter Three, these were years in which major changes were transforming cultural policy in the Soviet Union, as *proletkult* and *agitprop* were...
reshaped into forms of socialist realism that gave much more prominence to traditional forms of training and performance. In 1932-1933 this shift had not yet reshaped the Canadian Workers’ Theatre. Coverage in *Masses* of the 1933 Soviet plenum combined enthusiasm for *agitprop* with an awareness of the new Soviet emphasis on the professional and technical aspects of theatre. *Masses* reported the growing number of revolutionary troupes in capitalist countries, enthusing over the “tremendous possibilities for these troupes to become a mighty weapon of revolutionary propaganda and agitation,” but also noting the Soviet criticism of such work. Did it risk leading to “the isolation of the proletarian amateur theatre from the professional theatrical troupes, underestimation of the role of the bourgeois theatre and its technical artistic accomplishments...”?\(^{552}\) Such comments indicated that even at the height the Workers’ Theatre in Canada, such leading members of the PAC as Jim Watts, Toby Gordon and Oscar Ryan were attentive to the new post-*agitprop* directions of Soviet theatre. It also indicates that there could be significant lags, and room for local innovation, within a seemingly monolithic movement.

The Toronto WT had seventeen members in the spring of 1933. After a winter of collecting, writing and rehearsing plays, the WT had enough material to go on its first tour. Six actors plus the artist Avrom squeezed into Jim Watts’s small red coupe, nicknamed by her “Jesus Chrysler.”\(^{553}\) In mid-June the tour opened with a performance at the Jubilee Theatre in Niagara Falls. They performed in eight southern Ontario towns over the course of that summer. Sometimes they were received appreciatively, other times not. They were once run out of town by the local police. The group brought *agitprop* skits, plays and chants to workers outside

---

\(^{552}\) “International Movement Workers’ Theatre,” *Masses*, May-June, 1933, 2.

\(^{553}\) Ryan, *Stage Left*, 35. The name was, surely, another reflection of Watt’s developed sense of irony. The moment has since become legendary in contemporary left cultural circles in Toronto. See Michael Wheeler, “Jesus Chrysler: This Time It’s Personal.”
factories and inside labour halls. They were back in Toronto for a performance at the Empire Theatre on June 25th, after which they took a week’s rest, before starting on a second tour, visiting London, East Windsor and Windsor. The report in Masses, September 1933, described the enthusiastic response the group received in London, where “[c]lose to 3,500 people jammed into the old Brooks Motors plant to see and applaud the actors.” The report noted that “[w]orkers of this city probably gave the W.T. the best reception which they received anywhere on the two tours. Packing a fairly large hall, they greatly assisted the actors by actually being a part of the presentations themselves.” Their reception throughout the tour confirmed the traveling comrades in their belief in the urgent need for proletarian theatre in Canada. The Workers’ Theatre was receiving more requests for performances than it could fill with an unpaid company of volunteer actors.

Watts’s involvement with the Workers’ Theatre tour was, according to Toby Ryan, a new and entirely positive one. Members of the troupe stayed at working-class homes in each of the cities they visited. This was Watts’s first encounter with working-class at-home hospitality. Ryan does not offer much detail on members’ personal tour experiences, but she does make a point of describing the impact of this generosity on Watts:

For Jim, I think, this was a very special experience. She had never come into such close contact with ordinary working people. I recall the first night she and I shared a room in a Ukrainian home. We climbed into an ample bed and under a mountainous, soft feather bed such as many Europeans enjoy. But it was summer and very warm. The two of us, practically submerged under this down-soft cover, laughed most of the night every time we realized what a picture we must have made with just our heads showing from the billows of bedclothes.

---

554 They were Toby Gordon, Jim Watts, Percy Mathews, J.P. Smith, Avrom Yanovsky (as “chalk talker”) and Izzy Levine. See Ryan, Stage Left 35.
555 “Workers’ Theatre Tours Ontario,” Masses, September 1933, 13. Another summer tour, this time eastward to Gananoque and Ottawa, never materialized.
The family served them as honoured guests at a dinner of “thick cabbage soup and delicious black bread and butter, plus a very tasty home-made coffee cake for dessert...for Jim this repast was a first and I must say she enjoyed it thoroughly.”

Accounts of Watts in *Stage Left* make much of Watts’s own generosity and hospitality. Jocelyn Moore, member of the PAC, editor of *Masses* and later business manager of *New Frontier*, met Watts at university and remained a lifetime friend. She described this generosity and added that Watts had “a kind of unreasonable need” to spend money on others. Many resisted this gift-giving: “[m]ost of her friends, being poor and sensitive, couldn’t take this. But I was quite rational about it. If it gave her pleasure to buy me an expensive book, then I was delighted to have it.” Moore had met Watts in Charlotte’s Coffee Shop, on St. George Street. This was a basement-level lunch room and gathering place run by Ann Farwell, one of the campus lesbian crowd with whom Watts had associated several years earlier. It was doubtless a venue in which Watts exercised many of her social gifts.

For Watts was a masterful network- and friendship-builder. Moore’s section of Ryan’s memoir includes a description of Watt’s life in this milieu in 1932–33:

> Jim always had an apartment on campus and entertained a lot. Sunday brunches and things like that. All the most interesting professors, and a lot of the most interesting older students came. To be a member of that group was really something.

She recalled that these gatherings “made me realize not only what a terribly attractive person she was, and I mean attractive in the sense of drawing people in, but how much they valued her.” Toby Ryan also comments on Watts’s impact:

---

556 Ryan, *Stage Left* 36.
557 Ryan, *Stage Left* 32
558 Farwell didn’t finish her degree. She worked in the library at the Ontario College of Education in the 1940s and moved to Prince Edward County with Jeanne Minhinnick, who worked at Britnells and became well-known as an authority on early Canadian domestic interiors. Together they operated a sheep farm, and in the early 1950s organized the first rural library in the area.
Her generosity, both personally and to the theatre we were pioneering, was remarkable. On a personal level, I recall especially the fine Sunday brunches at her small but beautiful apartment on Elgin Avenue. You got to it by walking up a small driveway, where there was an outside staircase leading to the floor above. At the top of the stairs you stepped onto a lovely, cool veranda, with vines and plants all around for privacy.

Her ability to extend such hospitality to her friends and comrades was enhanced in the mid-1930s, when Watts acquired a cottage in the Rouge Hills, then an isolated farming area just east of Toronto, made accessible to privacy-seeking cottagers by a recent highway development. The area was picturesque, with wooded, rolling hills and steep banks. Watts offered this refuge to many in the workers’ theatre movement. “Many of her friends, including my husband [Oscar Ryan] and I, were invited for weekends — a refreshing oasis away from the city’s hot summer. She was very sensitive to people’s needs and offered hospitality without fanfare and with great good humour.”

She was, of course, also a Communist militant, who minced few words when dealing with her ideological enemies. For example, the 21 August 1933 issue of *The Young Worker* contained her article “What Lies Behind the Swastika Movement?” with an analysis and description of the “beginning of a systematic and widespread fascist movement in Canada.” Watts described the work of the National State Party and the formation of the Swastika Club. She argued that together they constituted “an organized attempt on the part of the ruling class of Canada to stem the increasing political activity of the youth and lull them with the utopian promises of fascist demagogy.” Watts urged the immediate need for anti-fascist organization by and for Canadian youth. She asked, “what are we, young Communists and class-conscious young workers, going to do about it?” For her, CPC/YCL leadership

---

559 The Rouge Hills were also the location of the first children's camp organized by the Jewish Women's Labour League in 1925, Camp Kindervelt. In 1935 the camp moved west of the city, when it bought a former park near Bolton, Ontario. See [http://www.winechewskycenTre.org/institutions/naiveltHistory.html](http://www.winechewskycenTre.org/institutions/naiveltHistory.html) (accessed November 8, 2010).

560 Ryan, *Stage Left*, 33.
against fascism was decisive. The enemy remained “the boss-class and the capitalist system.” To fight them, the army of progressive youth must grow:

The widest united front must be established among the youth in the parks and on the beaches, where the mass indignation is expressing itself in actual fighting with the opposing forces. Anti-fascist clubs must be built up amongst these youth. Sports organizations, C.C.F. youth clubs, and other youth organizations, must be drawn into the struggle against fascism. In the factories and trade unions anti-fascist groups must be set up and the greatest mass hatred against fascism aroused.

Watts affirmed that working-class unity under Communist leadership remained “the only path to emancipation.”

Having graduated in Spring, 1933, Watts poured all her considerable energy into the Communist movement in Toronto. Ryerson returned to Paris for September to study for a Diplôme d'Etudes Superieures at the Sorbonne. The PAC continued to be active, publishing *Masses* and performing at rallies and fundraisers. That Fall, PAC members were rehearsing *Eight Men Speak*. The second anniversary of the group’s formation provided an opportunity to relax and take a break from raising workers’ consciousnesses. The celebration was held at PAC headquarters on Major Street on 8 November 1933. No performances, only dancing, games, and refreshments, were scheduled for the evening.

As well as attending Fall and early Winter rehearsals for *Eight Men Speak*, the PAC’s blockbuster play about the repression of the CPC, Watts was busy in her role as Business Manager for the *Young Worker*. In her articles and editorials, Watts spoke as a Communist and a member of the working class. Watts was the only female member of the *Young Worker* staff, an achievement that may have been

---

562 He wrote a thesis on the “Sicilian peasant-real list novelist Giovanna Verga.” See Gregory Kealey, “Stanley Bréhaut Ryerson: Canadian Revolutionary and Marxist Historian,” in *Workers and Canadian History* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1995), 51. Kealey notes that “Ryerson was deeply influenced by the turn to the Popular Front by the Communist Party of France (PCF). Ryerson’s interest in building broader (rather than strictly class-based) support for socialism was also shaped by his earlier involvement in the Canadian and American student movements.”
563 Red Sparks (column), “Progressive Arts Club,” *Young Worker*, 15 November 1933, 4.
purchased by her willingness to take on the arduous task of accounting and financial management. She had her own column, “With the Business Manager,” in which she reported on circulation and subscription figures. Watts exhorted her readers to recruit new YCL members and chided the apathetic, the unmilitant, and the undiligent. The column was a platform for pep talks, challenges and pleas to increase subscription and sales numbers. An attempt to lead by example by selling the *Young Worker* on the street got Watts arrested on 22 December. She was released without charge.

On 4 December, the day *Eight Men Speak* premiered, an article by Watts was published in the *Young Worker*. “Our Struggle Against War” hailed the return of Peter Hunter from the First World Youth Congress Against War and Fascism in Paris and publicized his tour across Canada. This was intended to raise awareness amongst Canadian youth of the danger of fascism and imperialist war, and of the need to build a united front against them. Watts laid out the connections between class struggle, youth and war. Not only would young students and workers be once again “hound into the army as they were in 1914-18,” the bourgeois warring countries would inevitably attempt the destruction of the Soviet Union. A German attack on a country such as France or Poland “would militate almost the whole of Western Europe against them,” while a German attack on the Soviets was probable within months, because in fact “all the imperialist powers think they can see some gain to be obtained from an attack on the Soviet Union.” “Besides”, Watts added, every capitalist state sought the elimination of Soviet power:

...while there is the example of a proletarian dictatorship achieving progress at a rate impossible under Capitalism the government of each country is afraid of Communism growing within its own borders and thinks to lessen this danger by crushing the new order in Russia. As long as part of the world is Communist while the rest remains capitalist there will always be this danger. So we see that the struggle against war is inevitably linked with the class-struggle
and only by organizing against the ruling class can the workers of the world effectively fight war.\footnote{J. Watts, “Our Struggle Against War,” \textit{The Young Worker}, 4 December 1933, 5.}

“Our Struggle Against War” thus affirmed the view that the ever-deepening class struggle in Canada constituted the basic ground of progressive politics. Only the political leadership of the CPC could provide sure guidance as the ruling class prepared for war. The YCL, the PAC and the Student League of Canada expanded the territory of legitimate CPC organizing, although the campaign against war and fascism remained militantly class-based.

While Watts plainly supported the overall directives of the Third Period, her own journalism eschewed the gendered language typical of much CPC discourse. She did not use masculinity and femininity to characterize elements of Communist Party politics. Watts also avoided references to the Soviet Union as motherland, fatherland, or even homeland. She believed in socialism as \textit{a scientific} doctrine. For Watts, Communist political analysis, strategy and tactics all stemmed from the unfolding of an irrefutable logic that hardly required an unruly mélange of sexed and sexual metaphors. Her preference for a ‘cool’ approach to political analysis and action was reflected in her appearance in the \textit{Young Worker} as staff and contributor. Her byline was “J. Watts, Business Manager,” and her articles gave no indication of her sex. Her style of writing was as androgynous as her style of dress. A series of cartoons seeking to incite readers of the YCL paper to greater support for the paper showed the staff of the \textit{Young Worker} awash in a sea of unpaid bills. Watts is depicted at the centre of the cartoon, holding a bill and pencil. Her sharp upturned nose and sweater indicate that she is female, while her simple clothing and her place in the office amongst editor, writer and printer show that she is just another staff member.
In Fall, 1933 a series of editorials and articles on the pivotal role of the *Young Worker* called for more support and participation with the paper. Watts’s part in expanding and sustaining the *Young Worker* was crucial. A 30 June 1933 editorial quoted Lenin on the role of a paper as collective organizer: “We must squarely face the question – whether we are making the YOUNG WORKER any of these things: propagandist, agitator, organizer.” Watts also contributed articles and editorials on the importance of the paper itself. In her column, Watts used humour, irony and innovation to encourage more sales, more recruitment, more commitment to the cause. She began her 5 March 1934 column whimsically by introducing “a little serious discussion on something that we have kept to ourselves up to now, something that has already prematurely aged us, added grey streaks to our hair, and put a perpetually worried look upon our face. Are you getting interested?” The “something” to which Watts was referring was the paper’s balance-sheet: production expenses exceeded revenues. The solution to the deficit lay in advertising. Watts urged readers to become advertising agents for the *Young Worker*. Her explanation is direct and practical: “If our advertisers know that they have some results, then they will keep on advertising. So when you see an ad in our paper, patronize this advertiser whenever you can, and tell them that you are doing so because of the YOUNG WORKER!” This push to find new ways to finance the *Young Worker* was necessary if the proposed bi-weekly edition of the paper were to survive. Watts also canvassed prominent Party members such as Sam Carr and Oscar Ryan to provide testimonials in support of the paper. The *Young Worker* became a bi-weekly in April, 1934 and new subscribers were rewarded with a free copy of “that new pamphlet everyone is reading, “Socialism and the C.C.F.” – Stewart Smith’s classic Third Period denunciation of social democracy. Sales soon stalled. Watts’ columns

---

565 J. Watts, “Is this A Weapon?” *Young Worker*, June 30, 1933, 8.
566 “With the Business Manager,” *Young Worker*, March 5, 1934, 8.
came to be filled with entreaties, threats, and dire warnings, all in the name of greater sales and prompt payments.

When Peter Hunter returned to Canada in December 1933, the YCL organized a speaking tour. Hunter visited Hamilton, Sudbury, Port Arthur, the Lakehead, and Winnipeg. As reported by Watts in the Young Worker, the intention of the tour was to “apply the decisions of the recent World Youth Congress Against War and Fascism to the anti-war struggle in Canada.” In the memoir of his party years, Hunter described the role of the YCL in supporting his anti-war work, and conveyed the intense commitment of organizers such as Watts: “Wherever I spoke, the main arrangements had been made by the YCL or the illegal Communist Party, and I met with many local Party organizers. Anyone would have been shocked to see the hardships which were endured then by men — and women — who worked day after day to further the cause.” Watts was far better off than most other organizers, but she did the same work with the same commitment:

They spent every waking moment promoting the Party; selling the Party newspaper and other literature and spreading propaganda about Soviet achievements. The Communist Party of Canada (CP), operating illegally, was winning the support of thousands across the country and had a large staff of organizers. They worked for nothing one might say — nothing more than the same relief voucher upon which so many depended. But they had a cause which needed them, a cause which held out hope for the future.

Rather like Amelia Earhart, Watts typified (and was subsequently represented as) the “pluck” young woman of the movement. “Pluck” is resourcefulness and optimism, determination and doggedness. It can also refer to persistent assertion in the face of doubt and denial. These qualities animate the columns Watts wrote as Business Manager, in which she presented strategies for raising funds for the paper, such as selling advertising and staging fundraisers, and acted as coach and cheerleader.

---

567 Watts, “Our Struggle Against War,” Young Worker, 4 December 1933, 5.
568 Hunter, Which Side Are You On, Boys, 47.
for every effort on behalf of the paper. In her column for 18 December 1933, for example, Watts reported “The Editor, M. Korol has challenged the Business Manager J. Watts to socialist competition in the January Drive. The Business Manager has accepted the challenge and challenges the D.O. of Port Arthur. Hope he'll accept.” In the next issue Watts reported “[s]o far the Business Manager is winning over the Editor, having got $2.50 in the financial drive as against $1.00 from the Editor.”

From her first involvement with the YCL in 1932 and throughout 1933-34, Watts's work in the YCL, the Student League of Canada and the PAC entailed a complete immersion in the Communist movement. She echoed the Party line, but she also adapted it—both in tone, adding whimsy and ‘pluckiness’ to its rigour, and (to a degree) in substance, emphasizing bridge-building and networking across a spectrum of activities in a way more characteristic of the Popular Front than the Third Period.

***

Undoubtedly one of the most memorable and enduring cultural achievements of this time was *Eight Men Speak*, constructed jointly by writer Cecil-Smith and workshopped by a group of four, led by Oscar Ryan, a founding member of the PAC who was also at the time the publicity director of the CLDL and a YCL organizer. According to party lore, the play was written in less than a week. Rehearsals began early in October of 1933. It is the classic Canadian contribution to world *agitprop*, produced at a time when the style was passing out of fashion in the Soviet Union itself. With Toby Ryan, Watts was attuned to developments within the American proletarian theatre movement in New York City, where *agitprop* was still popular but

---

569 “With the Business Manager,” *The Young Worker*, 30 December, 1933, 18.
570 Alan Filewod, ”Performance and Memory in the Party: Dismembering the Workers' Theatre Movement," *Essays on Canadian Writing*, no. 80 (Fall 2003), 64.
gradually bending to a newer, more professional ethos. Watts’s influence pervaded the style and scope of the production.

In Toby Ryan’s 1981 memoir *Stage Left*, Oscar Ryan recalled that “Jim Watts directed the early rehearsals and, when the load became too big, turned over the job to me but continued as assistant.” Rehearsals were held almost every evening for two months. Ultimately, the play was a great success, in terms of the popular response and because of the prolonged legal controversy it sparked. Watts was also a member of the cast, playing the young Canadian Labour Defence League prosecutor representing the workers. Watts’s opponent in the courtroom is the lawyer hired by Capitalism, Capitalism, Capitalism and Exploitation. The character in *Eight Men Speak* is described in the stage directions as “sitting at her desk, which is covered with papers and legal books. She is dressed quietly, in a neat suit; her attitude is one of entire confidence in her case.” Her character is prosecuting the system by its own rules and procedures, and winning the case against capitalism.

Although obviously agitprop in many respects, *Eight Men Speak* was also far removed from the bare-bones sets and improvised performances of the Workers’ Theatre on its tours of Ontario seven months earlier. The play received a wonderful reception. As was discussed in Chapter Four, even by banning it, authorities gave the play and the Communists a new prestige. Cultural work was plainly no mere auxiliary to working-class politics. To Watts, the play’s renown meant that the workers’ theatre needed to be bigger and better organized in order to fulfill its role. *Eight Men Speak*

---

571 In November 1933, the American WLT put on *Newsboy*, an agitprop play heralding the work of the American League Against War and Fascism, and its newspaper, titled *Fight*. This is described by Himmelstein as still agitprop, but much better. It was performed indoors at a real theatre, used lighting to great dramatic effect, featured more developed characters (rather than stock figures or caricatures) and was highly choreographed. It was overall less doctrinaire, emphasizing the need to fight fascism and war, and referring to the leadership of the CP symbolically. See Morgan Himmelstein, *Drama Was a Weapon, the Left-Wing Theatre in New York* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1963), 16.


573 Oscar Ryan et al., in Richard Wright and Robin Endres, *Eight Men Speak*, 51.
Speak was both the high point of agitprop theatre in Canada and, ironically, a sign of its impending demise.\textsuperscript{574} In the Fall of 1934 Watts moved to New York to study with the Workers’ Laboratory Theatre, soon to become the Theatre of Action.\textsuperscript{575} In the fall of 1933 Watts had become involved with another prominent member of the YCL and the PAC, William (Lon) Lawson. Lawson helped in the production of Eight Men Speak, but in what capacity is unknown. He became prominent in the CPC as a party administrator and speaker, critic, essayist and editor.\textsuperscript{576} Lawson wrote film and literary reviews for Masses and was active as a political speaker for the YCL. By the spring of 1934, Lawson and Watts had married, in a quiet comradely ceremony that went unreported in the social columns. Why they got married is unknown. Perhaps the decision stemmed from Watts’s decision to study workers’ theatre in New York City. In many ways they were an ideal couple, compatible with each other and both deeply committed to Communism. They were also unconventional: Watts remained bisexual and non-monogamous throughout their long marriage.

In New York Watts (who continued to use her own name) and Lawson closely followed debates over proletarian theatre in the Soviet Union and the United States. They rented an apartment in Chelsea, and while Watts took classes in acting

\textsuperscript{574} Toby Ryan’s memoir sheds little light on this transition, which she presents as a made-in-Canada rationalization of progressive theatre work, one that aimed in large part to give audiences a more entertaining night at the theatre. Ryan explains that “[t]his production was a turning point for me, as well as for others in Workers’ Theatre. As a member of the cast, I was reminded again of how potent an art form theatre can be.” Her emphasis here is no longer on the political content of drama, but on its ability to draw the audience in, to engage and to entertain: “I believe good entertainment in the theatre includes audience involvement—whether they are moved to laughter, or to tears, or caught up in mystery and revelation.” In Ryan’s account, the shift away from agitprop toward stationary theatre took place in a cultural and political vacuum. The reasons she gives for moving away from agitprop obscure other imperatives and influences that prompted the shift to a more conventional style of theatre. Ryan also downplays the technical and artistic achievements of the WT as part of rationalizing the shift, claiming that at the time, it did “seem possible to reach out to newer and broader audiences with a theatre of high artistic standards, innovative in technique and in subject matter.” Ryan, Stage Left, 46.


\textsuperscript{576} Later, in the Popular Front period, Lawson took over as editor of the literary page of the Daily Clarion. With other CPC leaders he went underground in New York City, in 1940, when the CPC was declared an illegal organization. When he surrendered in 1941 he was held for several months in Toronto’s Don Jail.
and directing, Lawson wrote articles for *The Worker* on Father Coughlin and President Roosevelt. Through the Party and the National Student League, they already had many contacts in New York. Over the coming year they were immersed in the city’s dynamic cultural politics. Watts was taking classes at both the Theatre Collective and the Theatre Union. She and Lawson attended “New Theatre Nights”, organized under the auspices of the League of Workers’ Theatres. Here members of the Theatre Collective, the Group Theatre, WLT, and other groups performed new, short works. Actors played to capacity crowds of 1,400 and more. Much of the work presented combined elements of *agitprop* and social realism. (An example was the one-act play by Elia Kazan and Art Smith, *Dimitroff: A Play of Mass Pressure*, that premiered in June 1934). In his critical assessment of the left-wing theatre in New York during the depression, Morgan Himmelstein points out that these New Theatre Nights brought professionals from the New York theatre community into the thick of the proletarian theatre movement. Interest in progressive drama from both professionals and audiences underscored the argument for moving beyond *agitprop* into more realistic and technically-sophisticated forms of drama, of a kind that might be undertaken by repertory theatres, such as the Group Theatre was trying to be.577 Early in 1935, Watts joined a new training program designed with this new broader theatre movement in mind. This was sponsored by the New Theatre League and led by Group Theatre members, among them Elia Kazan and Clifford Odets.578

In January 1935 the Workers’ Laboratory Theatre was reconstituted as the Theatre of Action. This decision was endorsed, if not conceived, by the leadership of the CP. That it was part of an international realignment on cultural work was confirmed by the fact that the same process was occurring in other countries:

577 See Himmelstein, *Drama Was Our Weapon*, passim.
578 Kazan became a member of the Communist Party in the fall of 1933. Clifford Odets became a member in the fall of 1934. See Smith, *Real Life Drama*, 157.
Theatres of Action replaced Workers’ Theatres in the U.S., India, Britain and Canada.

Early in January 1935 the New Theatre Night program included a new play Clifford Odets had written especially for the New Theatre League, *Waiting for Lefty*. The shortness and style of *Lefty* reflected its place in the transition between workers’ *agitprop* theatre and a more broadly conceived left theatre, a period in which the value of technically sophisticated and psychologically realistic drama was recognized while at the same time the appeal of short, relatively mobile *agitprop* pieces remained. According to Howard Clurman, director of the Group Theatre and a close friend of Odets, “[t]he league was looking for plays that workers might put on at any meeting-place or hall.” Odets’s play has since become shorthand for the outlook and atmosphere of this period. Odets was a brilliant scriptwriter and his portrayal of the New York taxi drivers was polemical and realistic. It showed the effect that this combination could have in broadening the impact of political art. The timing and structure of Odets’s play created a much more intense reaction amongst the audience than *Eight Men Speak*, and this response would only confirm Watts’s faith in the need to develop the form of proletarian theatre in a more conventional and popular direction. While they lived in New York Watts saw *Waiting for Lefty* no less than four times.

The most evocative description of this response to Odet’s play comes from Wendy Smith in her history of the Group Theatre. Drawing on eyewitness accounts of the performance, Smith conveys the audience members’ furious identification with the play and its characters. The play provided them with an almost overpowering experience of anger, grief and empowerment. Her account is animated

---

579 After its spectacular opening, “Lefty” was performed every Sunday evening as a benefit for the New Theatre League, until 10 February, when it made its official premiere.
581 That “Eight Men Speak” had been performed one year earlier in Toronto, to considerable acclaim, has not been addressed by critics or academics.
by distinctly sexual metaphors, as she describes the build-up of dramatic tension, culminating in a moment when the audience’s emotion and anger was finally released in a process fusing actors and audience. Part of Smith’s description quotes from Harold Clurman, one of the leaders of the Group Theatre. Smith built on the sexual overtones from Clurman, who titled his chapter on Odets in *The Fervent Years*, “Consummation.”

Swept up by the passion they had aroused, the actors were no longer acting. “They were being carried along as if by an exultancy of communication such as I have never witnessed in the theatre before,” wrote Clurman. The twenty-eight-year-old playwright was awed by the emotional conflagration he’d ignited. “You saw theatre in its truest essence,” Odets remembered years later. “Suddenly the proscenium arch of the theatre vanished and the audience and actors were at one with each other.”

As the play mounted to its climax, the intensity of feelings on- and offstage became almost unbearable. When Bobby Lewis dashed in with the news that Lefty had been murdered, no one needed to take an exercise to find the appropriate anger - the actors exploded with it, the audience seethed with it. They exulted as Joe Bromberg, playing the union rebel Agate Keller, tore himself loose from the hired gunmen and declared their independence: “HELLO AMERICA! HELLO. WE’RE STORMBIRDS OF THE WORKING-CLASS... And when we die they’ll know what we did to make a new world!”

“Well, what’s the answer?” Bromberg demanded. In the audience, as planned, Odets, Herbie Ratner, and Lewis Leverett began shouting “Strike!” “LOUDER!” Bromberg yelled -- and, one by one, from all over the auditorium, individual voices called out, “Strike!” Suddenly the entire audience, some 1,400 people, rose and roared, “Strike! Strike!” The actors froze, stunned by the spontaneous demonstration. The militant cries gave way to cheers and applause so thunderous the cast was kept onstage for forty-five minutes to receive the crowd’s inflamed tribute. When they couldn’t applaud any more, they stomped their feet,” said Ruth Nelson. “All I could think was, ‘My God, they’re going to bring the balcony down!’ It was terrible, it was so beautiful.” The actors were all weeping.

When Clurman persuaded Odets to take a bow, the audience stormed the stage and embraced the man who had voiced their hopes and fears and deepest aspirations. “That was the dream all of us in the Group Theatre had,” said Kazan, “to be embraced that way by a theatreful of people.”
In his own memoir, *The Fervent Years*, Clurman traces the power of Odet’s writing to his ability to capture and convey “the troubled conscience of the middle class in the depression.” In his analysis of Odet’s work in the mid-thirties, Clurman invests considerable effort in disconnecting Odets from the CP. His description attributes Odet’s success to his “romanticism” or “youthful idealism,” rather than any revolutionary consciousness he may have possessed. Clurman emphasizes Odet’s appeal to middle-class notions of justice and equality, and several times cites the crisis of faith amongst middle-class Americans. About *Waiting for Lefty* and *Awake and Sing*, Clurman wrote, “[t]here was in it a fervor that derived from the hope and expectation of change and the desire for it. But there was rarely any expression of political consciousness in it, no deep commitment to a coherent philosophy of life, no pleading for a panacea.” Clurman refers to a thirties “enlightenment” -- to the conviction that it was necessary to “come to a clearer understanding of and control over the anarchy of our society” that brought many into or in line with the CP during the depression. Clurman emphasizes that the power of Odets’s political and dramatic skill lay in his “emotional experience, not his thought.”

This was the powerful milieu that influenced Watts in her sojourn in New York City, one whose lessons and inspirations would accompany her on her return to Toronto. Watts’s interest in, and commitment to the new forms of theatre went deeper and extended further than is implied by Clurman’s synopsis. Perhaps because of her bisexuality, or perhaps because the situation of Canadian Communists had been more dire than that of their comrades in New York City, Watts’s alienation from conventional life was more profound than any mere middle-class “disquiet.” Watts certainly possessed the middle-class desire for a rational response to the depression, but for her Odet’s work was important because of the way it combined dramatic power with emotional expressiveness. His work confirmed that the

---

combination of politics and art was possible and could be immensely powerful. In 1936, along with Martin Loeb, Watts would bring *Waiting for Lefty* to a receptive audience at Margaret Eaton hall in Toronto. The play’s successful fusion of content and craft was undeniable, even to the mainstream press: “With reason, sincerity and the most acute use of dramatic possibilities, it shows how exasperation with an existing economic system may drive men to drastic action,” wrote Pearl McCarthy in an appreciative review in Toronto’s *Globe* newspaper.583

***

In her memoir *Stage Left*, Toby Gordon Ryan describes the formation of the Toronto Theatre of Action. Her account muddies the sequence of the group’s formation, making it seem that the decision to merge *agitprop* content with realist style in a repertory company format was an entirely local one. She infers that the new name was chosen before Watts went to New York. As Ryan puts it,

> The few of us who were interested in a permanent theatre such as we were projecting met to search for a name which would express the kind of group we were to be. We searched long and hard, with dozens of names being suggested. Finally, we agreed: Theatre of Action.
> We knew there was such a group in New York, but no matter how hard we tried to think of some other name, we could not improve on Theatre of Action, which expressed so well the dynamic nature of our planned theatre.

Ryan does mention that “[t]his was also the time when there was an explosion of social theatre in the United States” but downplays the impact of the American cultural front on proletarian theatre in Canada.584 Ryan’s account implicitly claims

---

583 Ryan, *Stage Left*, 235.
584 Ryan, *Stage Left* 47. This memoir was published in 1981 and likely reflects the impact of left nationalist critiques of American cultural imperialism. Another critical line on the transition in the world of theater could reflect some leftists’ overall scepticism with respect to the Popular Front as the abandonment of class politics. See Denning, *The Cultural Front* 367 and *passim* for background on the U.S. movement and its critics.
the autonomy and integrity of the Canadian Communist movement in the transition to the Popular Front politics of accommodation. What does emerge strongly from both Ryan’s and Robin Endres’s accounts of proletarian theatre in Canada, as well as from the American historiography on this period, is that the key transitions — to longer plays, realist rather than agitprop style, and repertory companies (rather than amateur troupes) — all reflected both popular and official party support for broadening the workers’ movement. They were, as *Eight Men Speak* had earlier foreshadowed, indications of the Popular Front sea change evident after 1935 — a development that, as we saw in Chapter One, profoundly changed the shape and meaning of Communism in Canada.

Jim Watts and Lon Lawson returned from New York City to Toronto in June 1935. Watts spent the summer establishing a drama school, running training courses for actors and technicians in the new methodology she had learned in New York, and organizing the new Theatre of Action. While in the U.S., Lawson had worked as a writer, sending articles on American culture and politics to the Canadian communist press. When he returned to Toronto Lawson began to assemble an editorial board for a new magazine, modelled on the American magazines *The Nation* and *The New Republic*. *New Frontier* would also be the beneficiary of Watts’s financial generosity; Douglas Parker points out that the magazine “served as a model of equity between the sexes”: in addition to having such women as Margaret Gould, Dorothy Livesay, Jocelyn Moore and Jim Watts in leadership positions, the magazine exceeded any other Canadian magazine, including *Chatelaine*, in the number of articles, poems, short stories and players it carried that were written by women. In Fall, 1935, Watts traveled to Moscow to attend the Moscow Theatre Festival. She

---

585 The criticism has been that the Popular Front reflected American cultural hegemony and the abandonment of class politics.
586 See Douglas Parker, “Women in Communist Culture in Canada,” 45. For an interesting general discussion on women in the “new historical bloc” associated with the CPC, see Malek Khouri, *Filming Politics: Communism and the Portrayal of the Working Class at the National Film Board of Canada, 1939-46* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2007), 79–81.
wrote a series of articles on plays she saw there, and on the Soviet theatre movement itself, published in the *Clarion*. She also gave a talk on the Festival at the Hart House Theatre, which was covered favourably in the *Varsity*, the University of Toronto student newspaper. As always, Watts was building bridges to mainstream students and to the broader population of cultural workers in Toronto.

Soon Watts became one of the most prominent Canadian advocates of the Second Spanish Republic. The election of a Popular Front government of socialists, republicans, anarchists and communists on 13 February 1936 swept her up, in the company of much of the Canadian left, in the unfolding Spanish drama. Spain began to overshadow progressive theatre in her passion for Communism – indeed, at the end of Summer, 1936, she turned over the directorship of the Theatre of Action to David Pressman, a young American from New York City. Now Watts could put much of her energy into the Spanish cause. With her extensive New York cultural and political contacts, she could link the cross-Canada campaign to its U.S. counterpart. Soon the campaign, initially centered in Toronto and Montreal, extended to every major city in Canada. Based on her prior theatre and student activism, Watts’s leadership in the Toronto cultural left placed her in a strategic position to create a “new politics,” one in which her bourgeois background and intellectual training were assets.

***

Both Watts’s organizational and her writing skills were put to work in her first-hand participation in the Spanish Civil War, to which she was posted as official correspondent by *The Daily Clarion*. (She was also assigned to the renowned Blood

---

587 As we have seen, Watts had already visited Spain in 1931, as part of a walking tour with Otto Van der Sprenkel and Stanley Ryerson that terminated in Barcelona.
Transfusion Institute associated with Norman Bethune.) The *Daily Clarion* was justifiably proud of Watts, its second correspondent posted to Europe. Her reportage, it announced, would fill an important void in Toronto: “we felt the long-drawn struggle between fascism and democracy requires a Canadian on the spot who will counteract the openly fascist position of such men as C.B. Pyper of the Toronto *Telegram*, and to round out the honest despatches of Griffin and Halton of the *Star.*” Here was a “prominent cultural worker,” whose “stories will stick to the truth and will throb with sympathy for the brave Spanish people, for truth is on the side of democracy.” For her part, Watts was “dying to go” to participate in the struggle against Fascism, but, as she would later tell Victor Hoar, “I knew quite well that the brigade wouldn’t take me. So I was assigned to the Blood Transfusion Institute as a kind of public relations persons. But my scope was as wide as I wanted.” It was characteristic of Watts that, on encountering such a seemingly solid (and sexist) barrier, she worked to weaken it.

Watts left Toronto on 1 February 1937. She arrived, by way of Paris, at the Republic’s temporary capital in Valencia on 23 February. It then took further time to get to Madrid, since the besieged city was not easy to reach. Her *Daily Clarion* reports from the end of February 1937 to early January 1938 reveal, better than her subsequent interviews or the comments of contemporaries, the scope and challenges of her work in Spain. Just before Watts arrived, the medical transfusion unit established by Bethune in December 1936 had been reorganized and re-named as the Instituto Hispano Canadiense de Transfusion de Sangre. This was part of the Republican government’s efforts to streamline its medical and military organization. As the institute’s director, Bethune was given the title of ‘commandante.’ Watts, like many others, admired Bethune’s work, but found him personally insufferable. Yet he was extremely useful, as he became a recognized celebrity, another middle-

---

589 British Columbia Archives, Dorothy Livesay fonds, Jean Watts interview, T1627:0001.
class recruit to the CPC who was putting his life on the line for the cause. There were many news stories about him, and even a film. For all his abrasiveness, Bethune was crucial to winning support for the Canadian Medical Unit.\footnote{In a cable to the Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy Bethune wrote: “I have contracted with an English professional photographer to make a movie film of the work of the institute for the Canadian public.” A documentary film, *Heart of Spain*, was eventually produced by Herbert Kline. Kline was not American, not a photographer, and he had never made a film before. In 1935 he had been editor of the New York magazine *New Theatre*, where Watts had met him. Like Watts, Kline had arrived in Spain in February 1937. Watts also knew Bethune before she reached Spain. She met him again with his translator/assistant, Henning Sorenson, in Valencia. “Bethune Heads All Transfusion Units,” *Daily Clarion*, February 9, 1937, 1.}

Watts posted her first story for the *Daily Clarion* from Valencia, in which she described the reorganization of the Canadian Medical Unit into the Blood Transfusion Institute as “a positive achievement in international cooperation” and emphasized the importance of Canadian support for it. Watts mentions Bethune several times in her report, but avoids the adulatory tone adopted by other *Clarion* writers when they portrayed the man and his work. (Ted Allen typified this less critical approach).\footnote{Ted Allen, also of the *Clarion*, was in Spain at the same time as Watts. He was both attached to Bethune's institute and a member of the International Brigades. His military affiliation gave him the opportunity to visit the front. His reports focused on the international brigades' military successes and the wonderful morale of international volunteers and Republican militia.} Watts recognized Bethune’s importance, but she reserved the bulk of her praise for Canadian workers: “[t]he reorganization is the direct result of the generosity of the Canadian workers, whose contribution is greatly appreciated here. Each dollar from Canada is saving the life of one anti-fascist fighter.”\footnote{“Doctor Bethune’s Unit Reorganized Covers All Fronts,” *Daily Clarion*, 3 March 1937, 1.}

Watts’s journalism emphasized the social and cultural achievements of the Republic. She downplayed the political divisions within the Popular Front. From the first of her reports, Watts conveyed both the sense of daily Spanish life and the international political significance of the Spanish conflict. Although she would later speak dismissively of them as “colour stories,” her pieces effectively describe the people of the endangered Republic and draw out the historical significance of everyday occurrences. On 11 March Watts posted her first story from Madrid, the day after she arrived courtesy of a convoy of Scottish ambulances driving from
Valencia. Watts evoked the strangeness of “[w]atching the sun come up over the mountains, with the fields and the olive groves lying so quietly[,] it seemed incredible that only a few hours away was Madrid, where almost nightly women and children were being blown to shreds by fascist bombs.”

Watts’s coverage emphasized two themes. One was the everyday life of ordinary people in Spain. The second was the inevitability of the Republicans’ victory, given their support from the Spanish popular classes and the international progressive community. Watts’s journalism was partisan in the best sense, careful not to convey information that could compromise the Loyalist side in any way, and mindful of the daily human cost of the war. Her reports were pitched to her readers in an effort to bring these costs home to Canadians.

Watts’s stories focused on the daily developments of the war, but always placed them in the context of a life-and-death struggle between civilization and barbarism, progress and decline, science and ignorance, compassion and brutality. The civil war lent itself to this framing. Relying on illegal importations of German and Italian military equipment and personnel, and using increasingly illicit tactics against both military and civilian targets, Franco’s forces exemplified barbarism’s attack on democracy. As Watts reported on 12 March, when Bethune’s ambulance was attacked: “[t]he ambulance was the sole target of the deadly fire as it attempted to turn about after a shot struck the fender.” The four men inside, including a Spanish doctor, were forced to flee the vehicle when the engine flooded. “No sooner had they left than a bullet smashed the windshield over the steering wheel. As they crawled away, deadly accurate fire from a village a thousand yards away played around

them while high explosives burst on all sides.” In closing her report, Watts noted that this was the first time an ambulance had been the target of machine gun fire.\footnote{Ibid.}

Watts wrote with flair and conviction; her ‘hook’ was the human connection. She described her encounters with diverse and often accomplished people, and had a gift for astute observation. Her stories often quoted or paraphrased the characters she met. She used their words to convey the importance of support for Republican Spain. This was a marked shift away from the didactic quality of her Third Period cultural work. Watts never mentions the distinct political affiliations coexisting uneasily within the Popular Front, and does not refer to Communist Party leadership \textit{per se}. Her strategy is not simply a matter of ignoring these factors, but of shifting focus from immediate political events to their social context. She emphasizes the ways in which individuals in Spain – teachers, militia members, peasants, workers, and doctors (both foreign and Spanish) – were embroiled and invested in the daily struggle for democracy. Watts’s journalistic style was to “believe the best,” a stance that bestowed a warm-hearted feel to her stories while at the same time limiting their capacity to report events outside the Communist frame.

Watts sent her first stories to the \textit{Daily Clarion’s} Toronto office by cable; by the end of March she was no longer able to afford the cable service and was sending them by mail. She was involved in the daily work of the Blood Transfusion Institute, assisting with transfusions and helping load the ambulances usually driven by men (sometimes Hazen Sise, Herbert Sorenson or Bethune himself.) Larry Hannant has characterized Watts’s reporting in Spain as covering the ‘woman’s beat,’ implying that she was sidelined from the ‘real’ action and left to report on implicitly less important issues such as religion, culture, education and women’s work.\footnote{Larry Hannant, “’My God Are They Sending Women?’ Three Canadian Women in the Spanish Civil War 1936-1939,” \textit{Journal of the Canadian Historical Association} 15, no. 1 (2004), 153-176. Perhaps too readily, Hannant accepts Watts’s self-deprecating assessment of her reportage on Spain.} A close reading of Watts’s stories belies this characterization. Her pieces admittedly do not
dwell on military manoeuvres or major battles. They are focused on affairs behind the lines, on civilian life in Madrid and other cities. The impression from Watts’s work is that she did not consider these phenomena any less important than what was going on at the front.

Her writing gave Canadian readers vivid and engaging tableaux of the Spanish Republic. Watts’s depictions of schools, churches, art classes, orphanages, as well as her portrayal of international volunteers involved in non-military support for the Republic, probably made a more compelling case for supporting Republican Spain and the Popular Front against Fascism than reports on the pitched battles and military morale. Watts countered efforts to discredit the Spanish Republic as a lawless and anti-religious state. She described Spanish workers, in the wake of Fascist bombing raids, methodically cleaning up buildings and carefully removing books, art, and tapestries for safekeeping. At the end of March Watts took aim at the claim that Republican militia were carrying out a campaign of religious persecution against the Catholic Church. It was not religion per se, but the political and economic domination of the Catholic Church, its role in ensuring that Spanish workers and peasants had remained illiterate and destitute, that the Republic sought to end. Watts reported on a service held in a small Protestant church in a working-class neighbourhood on the outskirts of Madrid. Secure and peaceful despite the nearby barricades, Watts described the service and her interview with the pastor:

The white-haired pastor, whose father and grandfather before him spent their lives in building a Protestant church in Spain, takes as his text, God is love. Very simply he told his listeners that unless intolerance was removed, that unless people began to really love their fellow-men instead of merely talking about religion, we could have no peace in Spain.

Watts here credited religion itself as a positive force. She drew on the authority of the institution by citing the findings of “the committee of churchmen who came from England to investigate, that the feeling in Spain was against a decaying church
and its servants, but not against religion.” By acknowledging the social importance and place of religion, and respecting its work, Watts disarmed the argument that the Spanish Republic and the Popular Front were anti-religious. The only explicit reference to the Catholic Church comes from the pastor, who is quoted as saying:

“The problem in Spain today is not a religious one, but a social problem... The Catholic church (sic) has concerned itself only with the rich and the poor have had nothing ... After this war is over I think things will be very different. The poor will have a chance, and the bigotry which has been part of Spain since the Inquisition, will disappear.”

Watts leaves the door open for Catholic reform and renewal, with the church’s own redemption coming not from its institutional authority but from serving the social and spiritual needs of the poor. She makes a compelling argument, simply and powerfully.

Another story filed by Watts described the crucial medical work done at the front, and focused especially on the institute’s services to field hospitals. Watts accompanied Bethune and other Blood Transfusion Institute staff to three hospitals close to the front. She gave Daily Clarion readers a bird’s-eye view into the operating room, describing the process of giving a transfusion, the pain and weakness of the men receiving blood:

After so much pain this quarter inch cut seemed terrible to him and tears fell from his eyes. But the hollow needle was inserted, the rubber tube attached, and the little pump began to transfer the blood so urgently needed by this exhausted young body, from the bottle immersed in hot water. In five minutes it was finished, the little wound sewed up, and the lad had fallen asleep. Again, I needed fresh air.

By placing herself in the midst of whatever situation she was describing, Watts’s reports gave readers a sense of what it was like to be there. They could now readily understand the importance of the mission Bethune and the thousands of other

---

volunteers were undertaking in Spain. Watts implies that while such acts of devotion might smack of self-sacrifice, those who performed them experienced them as acts of self-fulfillment:

As we left, we shook hands all around with these doctors, nurses and drivers, people who were living and working under the most trying conditions, who had left jobs at home to come and do whatever they were best trained to do, refusing to work in the softer spots far from the front, preferring the more dangerous, more trying and a hundred per cent more uncomfortable post near the battle-field itself.598

Her style quickened readers’ connection to what was going on in Spain, which for Watts was even more important than broadcasting the work of Bethune and his staff.

For all the challenges he presented, Bethune was clearly a master of promoting the cause of support for Republican Spain against fascism. In December 1936 and January 1937 he, Hazen Sise and J.S. Haldane made a series of radio broadcasts to Canada. They described the work of the institute and canvassed Canadian support. Their broadcasts were published in a small pamphlet titled *Listen In! This Is Station EAQ, Madrid, Spain, Hear Dr. Norman Bethune*. The Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy introduced the pamphlet, stating "[t]his splendid humanitarian activity has been established and sustained by liberty-loving, progressive-minded, generous-hearted Canadians. It must continue to be maintained so long as the need exists."599

In April 1937 the broadcasts from Spain were resumed by Watts and her *Clarion* colleague, Ted Allen. The *Daily Clarion* carried the schedule of daily broadcasts, beginning at 7.30 p.m. three evenings a week: “They will thrill you with their vividness, their stark reality in the face of danger from shells that may at any

599 Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, *Listen In! EAQ, Madrid, Spain, Hear Dr. Norman Bethune, Prof. J.B.S. Haldane, Hazen Sise*. Toronto: Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, n.d. [1937]. Edith and Lorne Pierce Collection of Canadiana, Queen’s University.
time shatter the broadcasting building and snuff out the gallant lives that bring these bulletins to your very fireside.”  At the end of April, Watts filed a story describing the process of making the broadcasts, from getting to the radio station in the dark dead of night (Madrid was five hours ahead of Ontario time) to the exciting sense that workers throughout Canada were pausing to listen to what was going on in Spain. She noted the camaraderie of technicians and journalists in the radio station, which had been taken over by its employees in the early days of the civil war. At first the radio station concentrated on its domestic audience,

   doing amazingly good work in its propaganda for evacuation, for mobilization, for unity. It is heard not only behind the lines, loudspeakers bring it to the front and special broadcasts are made to the Spaniards, Italians and Germans fighting in the fascist lines. Enormous loudspeakers carry the voices of men who have come over to the government side, back to their comrades, urging them to fight on the side of their own class, and not for their oppressors.  

In March 1937 a second EAQ station was formed, capable of broadcasting throughout Europe and to North and South America. Watts explained to her readers that Herbert Kline, Ted Allen and Watts had come up with the idea of broadcasting articles, as a way of saving the cost of cable service. She described the response of EAQ2 staff: “We were met with open arms.” The station needed broadcasters and translators; Watts, Kline and Allen needed a way to get their stories to North America.

   Watts continued to file stories with the Daily Clarion by mail. These give no indication of events at the Instituto Hispano Canadiense de Transfusion de Sangre. In early May she reported on the movie being made by Herbert Kline and the Hungarian photographer Geza Karpathi in an article titled “Making a Movie of Dr. Bethune.” Yet Watts does not mention Bethune at all. She focuses instead on the

---

601 Ibid.
602 Ibid.
involvement of Spanish civilians. She vividly describes their response to being asked
to act out sequences of jumping from a truck or building a barricade. Her story is
mainly about the interest and help lavished on the film crew, from children, workers,
old women and peasants. As she remarked, “The main theme will be the work of
the institute, but it will be set against the background of the life of the civilian
population in Spain in the midst of war.” In her later interview with Victor Hoar,
Watts told him that she took a new job at the censorship bureau in June 1937. She
explained that this was because the war was moving to different fronts beyond
Madrid. Guernica was bombed on 26 April. A report in the *Daily Clarion* on 29 April
began: “Military events on the Madrid front, and in all the central and southern
sectors, were overshadowed by the appalling brutality of the fascist offensive against
the Basque peasantry in the Bilbao sector.” Three weeks later Watts filed a story
in which she described a less intensive but markedly similar Fascist strategy at work
in the bombing of Madrid:

> when you watch shells, coming at intervals of three minutes, landing
> a few hundred feet apart, all the way from one end of the street to
> the other, you begin to realize that these are “demoralization shells”
> and nothing else. The only hitch is, they may explode and kill and
> injure but they do not demoralize.

Watts refused to concede that Fascist tactics could do anything but stiffen the
resolve of anti-fascists in Spain. Watts continued to write these “colour stories” for
the *Daily Clarion*. At the end of May she reported on the Conferencia de Muchachas
de Madrid. She steadfastly refused to acquiesce in the death of the Republic.

Watts left Spain in January 1938. Shortly after her arrival in Toronto she
began a speaking tour, starting with a rally for Spain and the Mackenzie-Papineau
Battalion at Massey Hall. She shared the platform with Sam Carr and two returned

---

members of the Mac-Paps. Over the next year Watts devoted herself to organizing support for members of the Mac-Paps especially as they began to return home, and raising funds for Spain, first for orphanages in Spain, and as the tide turned increasingly against Republican forces, for Spanish refugees in France and elsewhere. Watts returned to Europe in April 1939, to attend a Paris conference on aid to Spanish refugees, and visit several refugee camps herself.\textsuperscript{606} She managed to get into Argeles, one of the biggest camps set up by the French government to house Spanish refugees. Watts was one of the first to report on the deplorable conditions inside the camps. That she returned in the face of this tragic turn testifies to her own strength and the depth of her feeling for what had been lost in Spain. She described it as “the greatest mass emigration for centuries, five hundred thousand Spaniards flowed over the frontier hours ahead of Franco’s troops.”\textsuperscript{607} In primitive and unsanitary conditions, the already weakened refugees, including thousands of children, were at risk of being decimated by exposure and illness. Watts’s reports, on the conference and the camps applauded the continuing resistance to Franco’s army, even in the face of his unrelenting punishment of Spanish Republicans.

***

In the 1930s the term “queer” was widely used in the communist press (as elsewhere) to denote oddity, the sense of things not being the normal or expected way. Jim Watts was likely considered a “queer sort of Communist” by comrades, fellow-travellers, and critics. Yet she kept on, in countless ways, building bridges and breaching boundaries. Watts’s organizing and activism connected her to a long tradition of women left activists in North America, from Emma Goldman to Mother Bloor. Like them, she lived her politics. Yet unlike them, she remained something of

a sexual anomaly in the movement with which she so identified -- a “queer” status that explains her absence from almost all official Party histories and memoirs. Watts publicly challenged the political and cultural domination of the bourgeoisie. Just as publicly, by assuming the name “Jim” and favouring the masculine “rebel girl” look, she challenged the conventions of bourgeois womanhood and heterosexuality. Watts’s bisexuality was not widely advertised, either by her or by her friends. Yet, simply by taking up such a position of prominence and independence, without sacrificing her right to live her personal life as she chose, Watts was making an important political statement. It was certainly a stance other people noticed -- as the following chapter will demonstrate.

Watts was uniquely and immensely empowered during the Popular Front Against Fascism, when her combination of contradictory class and gender identifications became not only more viable within the Party, but politically valuable to it. For Watts, her class privilege enabled, and the CPC implicitly permitted, an unorthodox way of life. Without both underlying factors, her life might well have been less happy, productive or even feasible. She built an impressive network during the years of the Third Period, which then blossomed into those of the Popular Front, a period that enabled her to connect the imperative aspects of her life: literature, drama, and socialist politics.

Persistently and consistently, Watts worked across the barriers between male and female, bourgeois and proletarian. Just as she merged aspects of femininity and masculinity in her character and deportment, she did not seem to consider it necessary to relinquish aspects of herself that were bourgeois in the name of any theoretical purity or political consistency. She was at the forefront of the Popular Front movement to merge mainstream cultural producers with the proletarian masses -- to make progressive culture more meaningful by ensuring it encompassed the lives of more-- and more diverse -- people.
Chapter Seven
Gendered Melancholy:
Memory and the Personal Politics of Jim Watts and Dorothy Livesay

In a sense, the lives of Livesay and Watts, these two Toronto middle-class women who entered the CPC in the Third Period, immersed themselves in its cultural front, and took up the causes of the Popular Front against Fascism and the Spanish Republic, ran on parallel tracks through the 1930s. Both were at once empowered and limited by the conditional realm of cultural freedom opened up by the CPC, which enabled them to think through and experiment with the new politics of gender and sexuality seemingly inaugurated by the Soviet experiment. Both joined the CPC not as wives, mothers, or workers but as intellectual women seeking both social melioration and their own cultural and political empowerment. As with other unorthodox middle-class women, class privilege provided Watts and Livesay with both the motivation and the opportunity to challenge bourgeois conventions relating to gender and heterosexuality. They joined a movement that downplayed gender as an analytic and organizational category, but depended on its logic and imagery. They were each empowered and limited in this movement, as it embraced the ever-more-conservative family politics in the ‘Fatherland’ and articulated the ever-more-conventional gender ideals promoted in the Canadian Popular Front. Both women were political ‘catches’ for a CPC keen to expand its urban middle-class base, paradoxically because they represented the kind of strait-laced bourgeois respectability against which they rebelled. Thus both women made their own difficult bargains with the hegemonic gender order, ones which cost them both dearly, and Livesay perhaps most of all. The political impact of gender and sexuality was never absent, as convention, currency, standard and measure, in their lives and their work.
Yet, shaped as they both were by this shared Communist context, Livesay and Watts were strikingly different from each other. In essence they experienced the same movement in different ways. If both were empowered, first by the space opened up by the CPC in the early 1930s that allowed them to become leaders in its often ‘theatrical’ resistance to state repression, and then in the late 1930s as important elements in the Party’s attempted normalization as a part of everyday Canadian life, they experienced this empowerment in dramatically different fashions. For Livesay, the Popular Front meant license to assume more fully the cultural authority to which her middle-class background and poetic talent entitled her. For Watts, it meant an even fuller articulation of her dramatic rebellion against the gendered and sexual conventions of her time.

This chapter traces the relationship between Livesay and Watts over the course of their long politically-active lives. It tracks, that is, the personal politics that both women lived as they navigated changes in Communist policy. It tells the story of their own struggles with themselves and with each other over sexuality. It suggests that one of the unintended and unanticipated consequences of Livesay’s assumption of full bourgeois cultural authority as a “distinguished author” was her pathologization and even demonization of Watts, a process that arose from Livesay’s highly-conflicted ideas about gender, sexuality and work. The friendship between the two women was of utmost importance to them -- perhaps most of all to Livesay, who never stopped thinking about Watts, even after her friend passed away in 1968. Watts was for her both someone she deeply loved and profoundly resented -- her dearest friend and bitterest rival. After exploring the shifting intricacies of Livesay’s relationship with Watts, I shall use the theoretical framework of queer theory, especially as articulated by Judith Butler, to illuminate some of the persistent contradictions in Livesay’s textual reconstruction of her comrade. This is an analytical task that can add immensely to a fuller understanding of both women. It is
also significant because Livesay’s depiction of Watts has influenced what others have written about her, very much to the latter’s disadvantage.

Livesay and Watts were very different from, yet immensely important to, one another. Their relationship made an enormous difference to each of them. From Watts’s introducing Livesay to such works as Shaw’s guide to the *Intelligent Woman* and encouraging her interest in socialism, to Livesay’s struggle to understand Watts’s sexuality, their mutual impact was always both intellectual and personal. In theirs, as in every relationship, social conventions, ideals and expectation became concrete issues that demanded endorsement, rejection or accommodation. Their relationship was structured by regulatory norms of class and gender, norms increasingly mediated by the CPC environment in which they both worked, and ones they negotiated together and through one another. Livesay’s early success as a poet coloured her investment in the CPC. Her involvement with the Party was triggered not by her own coming to political consciousness, but by her attachment to Stanley Ryerson, with whom she had a love affair over 1931-32. In this relationship Livesay found a measure of sexual and intellectual fulfillment that Ryerson did not. This relationship, and its demise, shaped Livesay’s decision to join the YCL once back in Toronto. From its beginning, Livesay’s engagement with radical politics was mediated by her emotional life and her effort to find a satisfying heterosexual love relationship. To imagine (and attempt) another kind of relationship would have entailed a defiance of the patriarchal ethos Livesay encountered at every level, from the personal relations of her family to the political relations of the Communist Party. It would also have undercut her symbolic value in the gendered world of the Popular Front, where as a middle-class woman she enjoyed considerable privileges.

The early friendship between Jean Watts and Dorothy Livesay shaped who they were and what they wanted for themselves, yet their relationship grew increasingly ambivalent as they became women. For each of them, but especially for
Livesay, becoming and being a woman involved downplaying the depth of their relationship, denying that they had really loved one another. To say that Watts and Livesay really loved one another is both to point out the obvious and to state the impossible, or at least the illegitimate. It is also to acknowledge the possibilities haunting their relationship, ones that were, for many reasons, denied, forgotten, and foreclosed.

Livesay and Watts were both significant figures in the history of Canadian political culture. Because that culture was not permanently revolutionized in the way they had both hoped, Livesay’s reputation has been kept alive within Canlit, with its tendency, as we have seen, of treating her Communist activism as an impediment, not an achievement. Predictably, the same political and cultural milieu has largely forgotten Jim Watts, who did not leave behind poems or memoirs to solidify her reputation. Watts’s substantial part in the history of socialist culture in Canada is only now gaining wider interest and recognition. This posthumous disparity has meant that Livesay’s writings about the period have exerted an inevitable influence over those who have reconstructed it. Watts has been recovered largely through Livesay’s work. This has worked against Watts, who rather than figuring as Livesay’s mentor, beloved friend, and political comrade, is constructed as her dependent, rival, and even opponent. In many ways, Livesay’s oddly malevolent account of Watts constructs her as a tragic and conflicted figure, a paradoxical combination of stereotypical “scientific” Communist coldness and wilful self-absorption.

Throughout this thesis I have been concerned to show the ways in which the CPC created a politics and a culture that addressed the ‘Woman Question’ in varying ways from the 1920s to the 1940s. In this chapter, I look at the ways in which ‘Communist memory,’ in this case that of Dorothy Livesay herself, has worked to tidy up and simplify the painful personal/political legacies of this past. This chapter argues that Livesay imagined Watts in heteronormative, highly conflicted ways. A
fuller historical exploration of her living, and then posthumous, relationship with her comrade reveals many things about Livesay herself, as well as about the cultural climate of Depression-era Communism -- and, beyond both these topics, it tells us much about the “melancholy politics” of gender under conditions of patriarchal heteronormativity.

***

Watts is a central figure in each of Livesay’s two memoirs, *Right Hand, Left Hand* (1977) and *Journey With My Selves: A Memoir 1909-1963* (1991). These books provide the only published detailed account of Watts’s life, and Watts emerges from them as an unfulfilled figure. The second, 1991 book even gives Watts an entire chapter. Here Livesay, for legal reasons, calls Watts “Gina” rather than Jim, but makes no further effort to conceal that it is Jim Watts about whom she is writing. Livesay bases this 1991 account on a diary she began keeping as a senior student at Glen Mawr, the private girls’ school on Spadina Avenue that she and Watts attended together.

Exerting a radical influence over young Dorothy that Livesay’s father endorsed and her mother deplored, and which made Livesay herself both anxious and exhilarated, Watts encouraged her friend to read Friedrich Engels, George Bernard Shaw, Havelock Ellis, Marie Stopes and other radical authors. Growing up in an unconventional household, dominated by her proudly iconoclastic father, Livesay, at least according to her recollections six decades later, experienced conflicting hopes and dreams.

A sense of family and individual conflicts dominated my teenage years in Toronto. It was only with my best friend, Gina, that I felt

---

608 These books provide the only published accounts to date of Watts’s life. She is mentioned by Toby Gordon Ryan and Peter Hunter, but not in a full sense.
at ease, free to speak out my real feelings concerning the
institutions of family, religion and capitalism, from all of which I
longed to be free. My dream was to combine a childish belief in a
fairy-tale Prince Charming who would rescue me, Cinderella, from
the shackles of my life, with the mature desire for a purposeful
feminist career as a novelist. 609

Yet her “best friend” soon revealed some crippling weaknesses, in Livesay’s memory
of her. Although confessing to being under “Gina’s” influence, Livesay also
reconstructs her as deficient and frustrated:

We had discovered that our ruling passion was to write. My diary
records that complication in these words: ‘Again, I am under the
influence of Gina’s brilliance. Her passionate need is to write, but
says that she cannot. Compared with her I should be uncertain and
depressed. But I am not...Most people have a reason for living, that
is to say, a philosophy, a creed. Mine is beauty. Gina, so coldly
scientific, hasn’t even that. There is nothing to balance her. She
should have been gifted in some definite way. It is terrible that she
isn’t.’

That Livesay publishes this opinion of her friend, without comment or caveat, 65
years after forming it, indicates her continued ambivalence towards Watts. The
“Gina” we discover in Journey With My Selves has an impact on the narrator, but
Livesay rewrites the past so that her friend is kept completely in the shadows.
Talentless and cold, “Gina’s” function in the text is to serve as Dorothy’s tag-along in
her own cultural explorations. Livesay picks up from this diary note and addresses
the absent “Gina” in the present tense: “Nonetheless, you did participate with me,
didn’t you, in most of my literary exploration -- the short stories, novel, plays, of
Shaw, Chekhov, Ibsen. But it was the shared poetry that meant the most to us
emotionally.”610 Throughout the chapter Livesay addresses the ghost of her friend,
who had died in 1968, and reveals her still-intense and unresolved feelings about her.

As recounted in the previous chapter, Jim Watts spent the winter of 1929–
1930 at her aunt and uncle’s home in Piedmont, California, while Livesay was in Aix–

609 Livesay, JWMS, 31.
610 Ibid., 64.
en-Provence. The revealing letters Livesay and Watts exchanged in that period constitute a principal source for understanding their relationship.  

Although Watts’s family attributed Jim’s difficulties to the rigours of the pre-medicine program in which she had been enrolled, Watts’s letters to Livesay reveal her to have been much more preoccupied by the question of who — and indeed what — she was. In her first letter, dated 28 February 1930, Watts responds to a letter from Livesay, forwarded from Toronto by her family. Livesay had learned of Watts’s breakdown, and suggested that Watts join her in Provence, where she was on an academic exchange program, enrolled in her third year in romance languages at the University of Marseilles at Aix-en-Provence. Watts’s reply laid her heart wide open: “[Y]ou know that, for me, living with you is the only real living, and always will be, but it isn’t so with you. How you tempt me with Europe. You and Europe together would cause me to die of surfeit of ecstasy.” Watts warned that their reunion might be dangerous, and implies that Livesay would not want to be around her. She explains that she is “living quite secretly, and find myself constantly horribly tormented, like an adolescent boy, or a man about to succumb to a brothel.” Although she had once, in Livesay’s description, mixed in with a “lesbian crowd” at the University of Toronto, she now seems to be seized by a sense of danger to which she had been earlier oblivious. Watts considers religion as a possible sanctuary from her sexuality, but one that seems unlikely to succeed.

...so... I am forced into religion, out of very preservation. Catholic churches are conveniently numerous here, so that in extremis I can rush to one. I keep seeing people, my sort of people, suddenly, anywhere, and wanting to begin to talk to them and have an “affair.” And it seems always that these people somehow know, and a very secret signal passes between us. Is there an underlying, hardly recognized sisterhood of these people? You see, I am already a bit

---

61 Letters Watts wrote to Livesay from Piedmont over the winter of 1929-1930 are part of the collection of papers the latter sold to the University of Manitoba Archives between 1978 and 1986. Livesay drew heavily upon these papers for both of her memoirs. As I shall argue, the way she treats, and at times mistreats, this source tells us more about Livesay than it does about Watts.
mad. Every time I go out I wonder, almost subconsciously whether I
shall somehow meet — anyone.\footnote{Livesay fonds, Watts to Livesay, 28
February 1930.}

Watts’s words here indicate an uneasy combination of affinity, identification, and
revulsion. What had been an early and naïve affirmation of homosexual desire was
changing into an acute sense of homosexuality as an “open secret,” heterosexuality’s
necessary but discredited other side.\footnote{On the ‘open secret’ structuring of
homosexuality in relation to heterosexuality, see Eve Kosofsky
Sedgwick, Epistemology of the Closet (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 67.}

After Watts’s declaration of her bisexuality, the two friends were eventually
divided from each other more by Watt’s relationships with men than by her
attachments to lesbians. Livesay’s position was a painfully paradoxical one. She
disapproved of the university’s lesbian circles. She was also jealous of Watt’s
relationships with men. Her decades-long obsession with her friend’s personal life, a
preoccupation still fresh with bitter ambivalence nearly three decades after Jim’s
death, is about love and old hurts. Livesay identified with and loved Watts, but could
not acknowledge nor act upon this. In her journal, her poetry, and her narrative
writing, Livesay insistently reiterates her heterosexuality. She has, she repeatedly
affirms, a sexual interest only in men. Then, very late in her life, and long after
Watts’s death, she celebrated her first sexual relationship with a woman.

What is also crucially at play here is their ambition and sense of possibility.
Livesay’s letters to Watts over the winter of 1929-1930 describe her desire to write,
her thoughts about herself as a poet and writer, and about other female writers, such
as Jane Mansfield, Elinor Wylie, and Gertrude Stein. Watts’s side of this
correspondence, in which she presents herself not as a budding poet but rather as a
reader, is equally preoccupied with poetry and female writers. Intensely interested in
literature, Watts did not aspire to make it her career.\footnote{Her letters to Livesay are sprinkled with bits of poems, recommendations regarding books to read, and comments on the work and private lives of the writers she was reading — but not projected plans to become a literary figure.} Literature helped Watts
understand and define herself in relation to her culture. It is also clear that Watts looked to literature for insight on living differently. Rather than seeing herself as a writer, Watts looked to literature to see how others lived. It is only from a certain, hostile perspective that this could be reconstructed as evidence of a tragic lack of talent.

In their letters to one another, both Watts and Livesay were critical of bourgeois society, especially its luxury-addicted matrons. Yet Livesay unmistakably presents herself as the upholder of mainstream morality. Although Watts's letters speak vividly of her struggles to understand her sexuality, and suggest a continuing attachment to the “lesbian crowd” that had earlier drawn Livesay's critical comments, in memory Livesay replies to her friend by hailing her conclusive break with her past and her rebirth as a heterosexual. Describing their return to the University of Toronto in September 1930, Livesay writes

By now you had broken with your lesbian circle and were ready to take on the men. Alas for Dee! For as soon as there seemed to be a young man interested in me, the time came to introduce him to you. And there was no way I could be your rival. You were like a rocket among candles: lithe, sinuous, graceful. Your pale silver-gold hair worn longer than a bob, your brown eyes the colour of a river in sunlight, your rose-petal skin: how do I find the words to describe the young woman you had become? You were avid for love and sex and you thought of me as a sister in whom you could always confide. I think that you were simply not aware of how you were hurting me.  

In the winter of 1930-31 Watts began an affair with Otto Van der Sprenkel, a young lecturer at the University of Toronto. In Livesay’s recollection, this represented the first time Watts had stolen male attention from her. (Livesay was not herself involved with Van der Sprenkel, but had introduced Watts to him; she was part of

---

605 Livesay, JWMS, 75. This is the most candid moment in her memoirs in which she indicates she was physically attracted to Watts. Her friend is depicted here an immensely attractive person, both to the young men she encountered and to Livesay herself. This is an aspect of their relationship that Livesay struggled with for the rest of her life. Until Journey With My Selves, Watts appears as the slightly malevolent but jaunty figure, unorthodox, undependable and yet somehow “pluckily” admirable. Only in 1991, after Watts had been dead for more than two decades, Livesay allows herself to express her anger, ambivalence, and sexual attraction vis-à-vis her friend and rival.
the group that gathered in Van der Sprenkel’s apartment to discuss Marxism and Soviet life.) Livesay finishes her account of this period with a revealing non sequitur. Watts’s affair “did not create a rift between us because by now we were having a lively social and intellectual life, which we had been starved in our early university years.” This non sequitur is then compounded by another: “Otto, by introducing us to wide areas of knowledge about Marxism, socialism and communism, increased our thirst for travel.”

In the 1990s, as Livesay reconstructs her Depression-era relationship with Watts, her friend, once the mentor who led her to Engels and Shaw, is now transformed into her wayward dependent, calling out for help. Livesay seems to present her readers with a sort of rescue narrative, with herself as a consistent and dependable foil to the erratic Watts. But underneath this, in plain view, is her ambivalent love for Watts. There were indeed storms in Watts’s life, but Livesay’s narrative strategy obscures her friend’s strengths and her growing sense of self-direction. Watts was growing into a woman who could take care of herself. For instance, Watts traveled with Van der Sprenkel and Ryerson on a walking tour through Spain and France in Summer, 1931, and in a postcard to Livesay made light of the effects her gender-bending appearance was having upon the Europeans: “People keep ‘monsieuring’ me,” she writes from France, “and have to be explained to that I am ‘madame.’” From Spain, Ryerson went to Paris and Watts travelled with Van der Sprenkel to Marseilles, on to Germany, and then to Ireland. Somewhere along the way, Van der Sprenkel’s passion cooled, and Watts landed in Paris, alone and understandably distraught. Livesay makes much of her friend’s emotional crisis in 1931, yet there are interesting inconsistencies between Livesay’s reconstructions of this moment and the actual postcards she received from Watts in Europe, ones

616 JWMS, 76.
617 Livesay fonds, Watts to Livesay, 22 June 1931.
which reveal much about the “rescue narrative” into which Livesay was reshaping her friend’s experience in *Right Hand Left Hand*. Livesay reprints a letter from her father, dated 5 June 1931, included perhaps because it provides a supposedly dispassionate perspective: “For the past two or three days hysterical cables have been arriving from the erratic ‘Jim’ in Dublin, saying she must have D or she will be sunk.” Yet a postcard Watts wrote to Livesay from Sites, the French town just before the Spanish border, on 22 June opens with “Stanley, Otto and I en route to Spain, stopping here for two days” and continues: “Keep wishing you were here for S., who is one of the world’s most glorious individuals.” Watts had offered to pay Livesay’s expenses for the trip, but Livesay’s father would not allow her to accept. On their face, Watts’s cables to Livesay seem to have been more about having Livesay join a happy touring party, not to ask Livesay to rescue her from it. Yet it is Watts who comes off least favourably in Livesay’s narrative of this time. Her summary in *Right Hand Left Hand* is unfeelingly blunt: “They [Van der Sprenkel and Watts] eventually went to Europe that next summer. Then he abandoned her and she telephoned me long distance asking me to please come to Paris -- she was going to commit suicide if I didn’t arrive!” Livesay’s muddled account leaves us with the impression of a hysterical Watts, dependent on Livesay’s greater equanimity.

Subsequent reconstructions of Watts’s experiences by Livesay raise the same suspicion — that a helpless, hysterical Watts has been developed, the better to showcase the steadfast, honourable Livesay. In Livesay’s account, Watts’s career in the Workers’ Theatre movement and as a CPC correspondent in Spain is slighted. It is the sophisticated and worldly Otto Van der Sprenkel that introduces her group at

---

618 Livesay, *RHLH*, 34. Livesay reprints the entire text of the letter written by her father to the mother of a young woman coming to stay with the family. J.F.B. Livesay explains the situation that Dorothy Livesay’s unplanned departure will create for the young woman visiting. He concludes (and this may be why Livesay reprints it here, in a sort of indirect self-recognition): “What I have written puts D. in a rather unfavourable light but I cannot help that. The trouble with D. is that she is intent on living her own life and in some ways is strangely irresponsible. No doubt she will succeed, but she will leave a good many corpses in her victorious career.”

619 Livesay fonds, Watts to Livesay, 22 June 1931.
university to Marxian socialism and sex, although Watts had earlier broached these subjects with Livesay. Livesay also conceals from her readers the relationship between Watts and Stanley Ryerson. Right Hand Left Hand reprinted a letter to a friend, dated July 1931. Referring to Ryerson, she wrote: “He and Jim and Otto are doing glorious things together (in Europe) and they want me and I can’t go and anyway I shouldn’t be telling this to you because I’m telling nobody.” Livesay’s introduction to this section of the book puts Watts and Ryerson in the same place, but downplays their relationship: “By the time I got there, Jim had fallen in love with someone else and was in no danger of killing herself! Tony [Ryerson], another friend from Toronto, was there, with a lot of other Canadian students.” The same story becomes more complicated thirteen years later in Journey With My Selves. Here Livesay relates a different story. Now Watts actually does attempt suicide. The link between Watts (“Gina”) and Ryerson is Livesay herself. She addresses the reader as Watts, using “you.” But again, in this version the relationship between Watts and Ryerson appears inconsequential: “[Y]ou had already met this student friend of mine while staying with Otto in Barcelona.” Carefully scripted and not the product of a faulty memory, the narrative now focuses not on Livesay’s own love affair with Ryerson in 1931–2, but on her rescuing relationship with Watts. In contrast with Livesay, whose relationship with Ryerson is presented as one that was important largely because it allowed Livesay to develop her own political consciousness, Watts seems once again to be a curious creature, combining cold cunning with hysterical emotionalism, calling out for rescue, rather than developing her own capacities to handle the world. In Journey With My Selves Livesay says that Watts asked her for Ryerson’s address in Paris. At every mention, she tries to convey the

---

620 Livesay implies Van der Sprenkel was an older, more sophisticated man than the circle he supposedly so influenced; actually he was born only one year before Livesay.
621 Her correspondence with Ryerson remains sealed in her papers at the University of Manitoba Archives.
622 Livesay, RHLH, 31, 36, 37.
623 Livesay, JWMS, 77.
624 Livesay, RHLH, 36, 40.
sense that Ryerson belonged to her, that it was through Livesay that Ryerson and Watts were connected.

Watts visited Paris and Livesay twice over 1931-32, at Christmas and in the Spring. Yet Livesay wrote that she didn’t see Jim Watts during the summer of 1932 after she returned to Toronto, and didn’t know where she was. One possible explanation for this may have been Watts’s role in introducing Ryerson to the Communist movement in Toronto, as relations between Ryerson and Livesay deteriorated. While Ryerson wanted to end their affair, Livesay persisted over the summer in her hopes for a long-term relationship with him. Retrospectively, Livesay wrote:

The tragedy was that I was awakened to a desire for home and man and children rather than for a career; and Tony had thought of me as a thoroughly independent, modern young woman who wouldn’t load him with responsibilities. Undoubtedly I gave that impression! It was I who made the discovery about myself and he did not take to the emerging person. I think all this had a rather damaging effect on my psyche. To be so ripe and not to be plucked!

Over the summer Livesay tried to salvage her relationship with Ryerson. She was unsuccessful and so, as she related, “What followed was my most painful year; back in Toronto taking social work at the university and having to endure a mutually-agreed upon separation from my lover, whilst all the while encountering him, as we both became more involved in the communist movement.”

Livesay sidelines Watts. Here, for instance, she doesn’t mention Watts’s politicization over the past year, or her prominence in the local Young Communist movement. Despite her

---

625 In the Spring of 1932 Watts made a trip to Ireland, France and England with Ann Farwell. She visited C.B. Macpherson in London (studying at the LSE) and, with Macpherson and Farwell, traveled to Paris. In a letter to her friend, Jinny, dated June 3, 1931, Livesay mentions “We have no clothes at all! So Jim and Anne (sic) had better bring Canadian sackcloth to ship me home in.” Cited, Livesay, RHLH, 44.

626 Livesay, RHLH, 47.

627 Trotskyist Earl Birney wrote of meeting Livesay in 1932 and remembered her as merely “a sentimental fellow traveller” of the Stalinists,” whereas Watts was plainly a far more central player. Earl Birney, “Canlit Between the Wars: Memories, 1926-46.” West Coast Review 15, 1 (June 1955), 5. Birney’s 1955 novel, Down the Long Table satirizes the CPC and Trotskyist movements in Toronto and Vancouver.
efforts to downplay their relationship, Livesay’s story regarding her own affair with Ryerson hinges on Watts, upon whom Ryerson had begun to fix his affections during their time in Paris:

You and Tony seemed to be good friends -- your wit made sparks fly at every meal. But between Tony and me there was a growing attraction that had begun back in Canada. One evening I felt ill and at my lowest ebb of hope for the future. I left the two of you and went to my room to break loose and have a sobbing fit. I knew I was in love.
You were concerned, Gina. You came to sit at my bedside. “What’s the matter? What’s the matter, Dee?” And I finally blurted it out: “It’s just so crazy. Such a weird cycle. Hugh is in love with me and I am in love with Tony and he is in love with you and you are in love with Otto.”

Livesay describes Watts’s subsequent part in initiating Livesay’s romance with Stanley Ryerson, followed by Watts’s supposed effort to overdose on aspirin: “Oh Gina! From what depths of despair and loneliness did you do such a thing! Tony and I were now more close than ever before, working to save you. And yet -- perhaps it was only a dramatic gesture on your part? Perhaps you had not swallowed all those aspirin? We were too distracted really to find out. In a day or so you had recovered and we took you to the Gare St. Lazare to catch your train to Le Havre and the voyage home.”

Although dissecting the slanted ways in which Livesay reconstructed the emotionally fraught triangle she shared with Ryerson and Watts may not seem politically important, the outcome of such bitterly remembered personal politics has been a pervasive caricature of Watts, one that builds up an impression of imbalance and incoherence. Watts serves to illustrate Livesay’s character as good and honourable by embodying the reverse. If at points Livesay acknowledges her antipathy toward Watts, she still remains, doggedly, the aggrieved party. For instance, in *Journey With My Selves* Livesay begins the account of her reunion with

---

618 Livesay, *JWMS*, 78.
629 Ibid.
Watts in France with the bitter acknowledgment of it as “another chapter of our loves and rivalries.” A rivalry that in earlier descriptions of her life in the 1930s had not been at all central now becomes the unifying theme of an entire chapter. Livesay’s account here vacillates between generous and aggrieved -- but her vision of herself as the hapless one always prevails. The sense of their relationship that Livesay conveys in this chapter is of herself as enthralled and dominated by Watts. Watts defined the relationship, Livesay reacted. Watts initiated affairs, Livesay tried to protect herself. The responsibility for the ill will between them resides with Watts alone. Notwithstanding her occasional emotional breakdowns, Watts comes across as confident, callous and sometimes cruel, Livesay as impeccably and unbreachably well-intentioned.

Livesay’s earlier recollection of the 1930s in Right Hand Left Hand provides more detail about her political and emotional involvements than does Journey With My Selves. Jim Watts died in May of 1968. In the years following, Livesay began planning and researching her memoir of the 1930s, Right Hand Left Hand. In this account of her political activism with the Communist movement, Livesay downplays the extent and importance of Watts’ cultural work and political activism. But the last page of the book is a picture of Jim Watts (with Lon Lawson) in uniform. The photograph is unexplained and Watts remains unidentified. However, this version of the period and this relationship was not, for Livesay, the final word. More than ten years later Livesay made another effort to write about Jim Watts and that period of her life, but this time looking back at the period from more than fifty years. The intensity of Livesay’s feelings is, if anything, stronger in this second memoir. Livesay remained in contact with Lon Lawson after Jim’s death, and had asked Lon Lawson for any letters Jim had received from Livesay. In this later memoir, Livesay

---

630 Livesay, JWMS, 76.
631 When Lon Lawson put their Victoria house up for sale, Livesay hoped to buy it and began negotiations with Lawson.
addresses Watts directly and posthumously in order to come to terms with a relationship that obviously continued to affect her deeply more than twenty years after Watts’s death.

I have emphasized Livesay’s negativity and the inconsistencies in her depictions of Watts. The effect of Livesay's remembrances is to emphasize aspects of Watts’s life such as her instability (leaving school, overdosing) and sexual “lifestyle” (Livesay’s word) and so to underplay her work and her positive impact on the Communist movement in Canada. Livesay emphasizes her rivalry with Watts, and consistently suggests her emotional attachment to her was damaged by the events of the 1930s. On the other hand, her sense of being in a relationship with both Watts and Ryerson clearly remained a focal point, emotionally and politically, for Livesay throughout her life. Livesay writes and rewrites of the pivotal periods that drew them together and the events that pulled them apart. Because Livesay does not and cannot acknowledge the formative impact that Ryerson and especially Watts had upon her and her work, both of them, and especially Watts, pose problems for her that cannot be resolved, even in her last memoir. She was haunted by them.

Livesay, in struggling to remember Watts and her context, cannot really allow her to be a significant figure in shaping it. Watts’s gender-bending traits are implicitly represented as pathologies. They might today be seen as indications of her resistance to the organization of social power -- an organization that later, in the form of Livesay’s censorious memoir, exacted its posthumous revenge.

***

Livesay’s account of her experience as a CPC member conveys the coldness and violence that she apparently associated with being an effective Communist. She provides a vivid account of alienation and compartmentalization. Being a Communist
for Livesay in 1932-4 meant *not* being middle-class. It also meant becoming a
successful (rather than a despairing or conflicted) heterosexual. It meant embracing
scientific socialism as the sterilized antidote to the messiness and difficulties of
romantic love. Communism also gave her a sense of cultural direction. In the often
angry *agitprop* poetry Livesay wrote as a CPC member, she assumes an almost clinical
distance from the unresolved question of her own creativity and what this entailed
for her life as a woman. Livesay had isolated herself as a CPC member and within
the CP itself. Even her discovery of “social protest” poetry had a quality of
disengagement about it, entailing as it did an affiliation with Spender and Day Lewis,
rather than with cultural workers on her very doorstep.

And with the “turn” to the Popular Front after 1934/5, Livesay found that it
was the safely middle-class orientation of the Popular Front that appealed to her.
This stance enabled her to take up the literary traditions of bourgeois culture she
had absorbed in Toronto and Paris, but turn them in a socialist direction. For
Watts, it was the broad “people’s” orientation of the popular front that was valuable.
In Toronto and in Spain, she did not hold herself aloof from it. As we have seen, she
celebrated the popular energies it had released. Quite the contrary for Livesay. For
her, the Popular Front was significant because it validated and empowered her
*individual* work as a poet. Thus one and the same “line change” had very different
respective implications for these two women. For Watts, it was the political opening
of the Popular Front, the way it transcended the old dualities and exclusions of class-
based politics that allowed her to flourish in the new atmosphere. For Livesay, it was
the middle-class privilege the Popular Front accommodated, a position that allowed
her to exit the Party without much ado while retaining her place, and eventually her
renown, in Canadian arts and letters.

At several points in her 1991 memoir Livesay characterizes Watts’s abilities as
coldly scientific and analytical, in contrast to her own poetic talent and spontaneity.
Yet she also details their shared interest in poetry and writing, their “mutual passion.” As much as reflecting the differences in their interests and abilities, Livesay’s comments reflect her own ambivalence about her attachment to Watts and the sort of life Watts represented for her. Comments and characterization of Watts pop up continuously in Livesay’s memoirs and in her journals. Many indicate Livesay’s effort to define herself and to distance herself from Watts. Watts became deeply interested in medicine and science and she was analytical. But this didn’t diminish her interest in literature or poetry, or in music or in any of the arts. Thus Livesay’s almost demonizing characterization is clearly inaccurate. Watts seems to have been uncommonly sensitive to and perceptive about others, and particularly averse to middle-class conventionalism, toward which she established an early and unyielding disdain. In contrast to Watts’s clear-eyed detachment from accepted wisdom and custom, her visible willingness to take risks in establishing her distance from it, Livesay engaged in a far more equivocal process of engagement with hegemony. It was one that combined aloofness, absorption, ambivalence, and frustration.

In *Journey With My Selves*, Dorothy Livesay quotes heavily from the journal she kept from 1927 to 1931. Her entries are chiefly about creativity, writing, religion, passion, knowledge and despair - in the overwrought style of a young writer inclined to pathos. In her memoir, Livesay notes that “That summer [1927], when we were both getting prepared to attend university, marked the beginning of the end of our intense friendship.” In contrast to Watts’s clear-eyed detachment from accepted wisdom and custom, her visible willingness to take risks in establishing her distance from it, Livesay engaged in a far more equivocal process of engagement with hegemony. It was one that combined aloofness, absorption, ambivalence, and frustration.

632 Livesay, *JWMS*, 70.
have already encountered in another context. The published version then follows, for the purposes of comparison.

Again I am under the influence of Jim’s brilliance. Her passionate need is to write, and she says that she cannot. Compared with her I should not be uncertain, depressed. But I am. And the thought of how she is wasted makes it worse. Her subtlety is pointed: she is intensely analytic, just the right mind for the age. Some sly devil inside me is whispering “born to blush unseen, and waste its fragrance on the desert air.” Lord, how unsuitable! And yet to patient, pseudo minds, the cap fits. It is these pseudos — no much, much less than pseudos — that she is among, lost among. Jim, how horrible that that sugary epithet belongs to you! But I must cease apostrophizing . . .

The published journal extract has been edited to convey an opposite meaning:

Again, I am under the influence of Gina’s brilliance. Her passionate need is to write, but she says that she cannot. Compared with her I should be uncertain and depressed. But I am not . . . Most people have a reason for living, that is to say a philosophy, a creed. Mine is beauty. Gina, so coldly scientific, hasn’t even that. There is nothing to balance her, to hold her. She should have been gifted in some definite way. It is terrible that she isn’t.

Aside from her reflection on the supposed waste of Jim Watts’s talents among “pseudos,” what emerges clearly here is the dominant theme of her journal: Livesay’s uncertainties about her own writing, about poetry versus prose, and — especially — the question of whether it is possible to be a woman and have a career as a poet or writer. She is continually seesawing between her ambition to write major works and her drive to renounce all such worldly ambitions. In Spring, 1929 she wrote in her journal: “The key to all these riddles is that D.K. Livesay would rather be happy and loved than be an artist. So I am defeated everywhere — a conservative and a woman.” Her apostrophizing is related to her being ‘again’ influenced by Watts. Livesay was trying to remove herself from Watts’s influence. Discrediting her friend’s interests in science and medicine was a part of this struggle. Despite the fact

---

633 Livesay fonds, Livesay Journals, 7 April 1928.
634 Livesay, JWMS, 64.
635 Livesay Fonds, Livesay Journals, 17 September 1928.
that in her memoirs, Livesay describes herself as dominated by (a sometimes cruel) Watts, and presents herself as under Watts’s spell, she also presents Watts as the less-talented of the two.

The demands of university kept them apart, but did not diminish their importance for one another. Watts at University College, and Livesay at Trinity, were both struggling with what it meant to be young, female, and ambitious. At the beginning of October 1928, Livesay wrote in her journal: “Jim and I cling more closely (if possible) than before. We sadly need the stimulus of ourselves, separated as we are for most of our days.”

When the end of their intense friendship did come, it was more abrupt than Livesay’s portrayal suggests. It had nothing to do with their different courses of study. The two had continued to be exceptionally close over the course of their first year at university, and as the last-noted journal entry indicates, remained so in the fall of their second year. What separated them was Livesay’s disapproval of what Watts was doing:

> By our second university year something else was happening to your emotional life that distressed me deeply. You were in love with a camp counsellor and had been on the verge of a lesbian relationship that summer. I hated to think of it. And now, on campus, you were going around with a known lesbian crowd.

This was the occasion for Livesay’s and Watts’s first ‘rift,’ which lasted from the 1928-29 school year to the early months of 1930. By the time they met one another again in the summer of 1930, back in Toronto, Livesay had had her own exposures to same-sex desire, encounters that sped her efforts to become a heterosexual and a ‘woman.’ She had been intent on falling in love since her first year at university. This

---

636 Livesay Fonds, Livesay Journals, October 1928.
637 Livesay’s discussion of Watts’s stormy emotional life belies her characterization of Watts as “so coldly scientific.” The emphasis in this quote is on Livesay’s emotions, her sense of distress. To think of “it” distressed Livesay, who in response (i.e. in heterosexual defence) reduced her emotional and physical proximity to Watts.
did not happen easily or quickly, but took several years of concentrated effort, despite Livesay’s certainty that it could not happen soon enough.

In *Journey With My Selves* Livesay enumerates the close attention Watts paid to her, such as comparing her to the bells in a piece of music they heard together at Convocation Hall, the joking and mocking observations she made that Livesay warded off with laughter, and her comments on Livesay’s family, her upbringing and her talent as poet (these last made in 1967, one year before Watts died). The close attention each paid to the other is clear. Each fostered the other’s development. One woman’s relationships strongly affected the other. Yet there were significant rifts. The years 1928-29 were those in which Watts was associating with “known lesbians” at the University of Toronto. In her journal for this year, Livesay mentions Watts in several places. She was clearly trying to dissociate herself from her friend, but with a passionate intensity that betrayed her deeper attachment.

Some of the strain between the two in the late 1920s stemmed from Livesay’s perceived, and profound, need to fall in love. This necessity preoccupied her during her first two years at university. Her infatuations (detailed in her journal and described in *Journey With My Selves*) enabled her to enter into the logic of heterosexual desire without fully engaging with her own highly ambiguous feelings about it. This difficult issue comes up much more frequently in her journal entries over the coming year, while Livesay was away from her family and feeling her way into the world.

Her writings reflect her unhappiness with university, her efforts at sociability, her ideas about art and knowledge, and especially her concern about what a commitment to art and writing would mean for her. Yet the urgent need to fall in love was her journals’ recurrent, driving theme. Livesay believed that she was repressing an emotional and sexual energy associated with creativity. Livesay’s

---

638 If they had been closeted would Livesay have felt such a strong aversion?
journal entries note the recognition she was achieving as a poet -- winning prizes and having her first collection published in the spring of 1928 (some of which was made up of poems written to or for Jim Watts). But she claims in her journal that poetry meant little to her. Nothing compared to her desperate need to fall in love. She pursued this quest with an almost detached intensity. She linked her need to fall in love with what she considered her need to get over herself, to overcome what she called her self-conceit. She writes often in her journal of eschewing ambition altogether, and with it her investment in becoming a poet. At times she seems able to convince herself that the annihilation of her ego as a creative person was what she herself most wanted. The key to this liberating annihilation would be, in her estimation, a love relationship with a man.

One of the more bizarre narratives that Livesay includes in *Journey With My Selves* relates to her experience of being “possessed” by the aura of a young man with whom she was infatuated. This event was associated with the poet Wilson MacDonald, who gave a demonstration of magic at a party Livesay attended. In response to a question by Livesay, MacDonald drew her aside to ask if she wanted to be visited by a ghost. She told him she did. At two a.m., the appointed time, Livesay had the overwhelming sensation of being “enveloped by the presence of Wilson. Indeed, he invaded my very bed. ‘What do you desire?’ he seemed to be saying, like a wizard in a fairy tale, and all I could whisper, but with my whole body, was ‘Stephen, Stephen, Stephen!’ Then Stephen’s aura came before me, Wilson’s gradually receding.” This psychic experience gave Livesay what she thought she wanted: a complete possession that rendered her utterly powerless. Her published account draws on the journal entry she made in 1928, but not entirely faithfully. In her memoir, Livesay continues her account: “[t]he next day I could not rest until I had told it all to Gina. Her response was to tell me that the anaesthetic effect was

---

639 Livesay, *JWMS* 91.
not Wilson’s doing, but my own. It may well have been. Here Livesay quotes from her diary entry of April 7, 1928: The entry quoted here includes in parentheses a line that Livesay omitted. The full quote gives a sense of the struggle Livesay was engaged in with herself, her great effort to comply with prevailing notions of heterosexual love and desire, described by Judith Butler as ‘the regulatory apparatus of power’ and her continuing effort to subdue her resistance to this. Her description in her journal indicates that she is trying to understand her “psychic experience” as the expression of her desire for heterosexual unity, a desire she is convinced had been improperly suppressed through her parents’ encouragement of her career as a writer, her sense of herself as an artist – in short, by her ambition and her conceit. Livesay interpreted her psychic experience in the following way: “What I wished shows that my subconscious was working, and was susceptible to any mental influence. A queer business at all events. It proves that I am not wrong in thinking myself repressed. But in saying that I feel no egoistic satisfaction. There is no fear of my being stupidly obsessed by it: I can still regard ego as amusing -- and dangerous.” Livesay’s comments here about her ego reflect her sense that hers was unreliable, liable to undermine her best efforts at successful socialization. Her comment that she is right in thinking herself repressed indicates her belief that the ‘egotistical’ conceit that she was an artist was responsible for the repression of a ‘healthy’ (as heterosexual) desire for love, epitomized by being possessed by a man. Livesay’s explanation of her two a.m. psychic experience helped her align herself with the regulatory regime of heterosexuality and the necessity of her assumption of womanhood. It was an ambivalent decision. Her repeated and unexpected retreats from womanhood and rebellion against it are reflected in the final paragraph of this entry: “Again I am under the influence of Jim’s brilliance.”

640 Livesay, JWMS, 99.
641 Livesay fonds, Livesay Journals, 7 April 1928.
642 Ibid.
In her first year at university, Livesay had been an increasingly reluctant “bluestocking”, anxious about her talent as a writer and even more anxious about becoming a woman. Her “psychic experience” at the end of this first year amounted to an early effort to identify herself within the heterosexual regime, and it showed the considerable conflict that attended this effort. Livesay’s comment on being “under the influence of Jim’s brilliance” was similar to her imagined psychic possession — in both cases, she represented herself as being quite powerless. Her journal conveys Livesay’s sense of herself as existing inwardly only. She was thwarted in her efforts to develop what she considered ‘appropriate’ heterosexual relationships with young men. Writing served as a consolation:

> My trouble is, that depressed with the effect of my contacts with life, only success in art can uplift me: but the more successful I become in art, the greater will be the gap; the deeper I shall fall in the time of failure. Living among artists may be the saving compromise; living with any people not in the same external circumstances as myself would help: my mountainous difficulty is living [corrected to “this life”] among university students.\(^{643}\)

Livesay describes their early years at university as difficult for both Livesay and Watts, involving a transferral of their attention and attachments from themselves and their Bryn Mawr female classmates and teachers to men. They had to navigate a shift from homosocial attachments to the rigidly heteronormative environment of the university. Livesay struggled mightily in this struggle — far more at this stage, it seems, than did Watts. She also won her “battle to womanhood” more conclusively than Watts ever did.

In their first year at university the two continued to be each other’s most important friend and ally. In their second year Livesay continued to rely on Watts for emotional support and intellectual stimulation, except for relatively brief periods of estrangement. Yet, eventually Livesay started to see the repudiation of their

\(^{643}\) Livesay fonds, Livesay Journals, 28 March 1929.
friendship as key to her successful achievement of heterosexuality, and with that, the enjoyment of "a lively social and intellectual life." Livesay acknowledges Watts's importance to her development as a poet and writer, but she takes considerable care to indicate the distance that grew up between them. Many passages in her memoirs detail their rifts and their uneasy efforts to repair them later in life. The history of their relationship as detailed by Livesay is one of repeated repudiations, conflict, rivalry. The memoirs also contain a melancholy sense of loss, but one that resists any clear and open articulation.

Livesay's memoirs document her struggle to be a woman and a writer. As the talented child of a literary family that used its connections on her behalf, she had a considerable advantage in this struggle. Her journals for the period of 1928-30 provide much more detail on her efforts to reconcile her desire to write with conventional notions of femininity and womanhood. Livesay wanted to be a woman as much as she wanted to be an artist. Yet Livesay's embodiment of femininity was deeply ambivalent not only because of her talent as a writer but also because of her attachment to Watts and to their mutual passion for culture, their "passionate assimilation" of poetry pulling each one out of herself and towards the other. Livesay's struggle to become a woman involved a lifelong and at times violent effort to repudiate her attachment to Watts.

Livesay's disavowal of Watts in 1928 constituted a perverse testament of love. Certainly Livesay enforced / established her own femininity by disavowing her attachment to Watts, a move that was all the more urgent in light of Watts's association with lesbians at the University of Toronto. But for Livesay womanhood was inevitable, no matter how long it took or difficult it proved to be to fall in love with a man. Dorothy Livesay 'became' a woman between 1928 and 1931. She 'found'...
conclusively that she was a woman in the summer of 1931, when she ‘lost’ her virginity. Livesay’s repudiations – first of Watts, then of other potential women lovers – were a part of assuming an identity as feminine. To do this meant repudiating homosexual desire. It meant identifying with men as a woman.

This repudiation entailed much more than the selection of partners with whom she had sex. In her journal for this period she returns again and again to her writing and creativity, to her effort to find a place where she could forget herself, her history and ambition, and immerse herself in selfless work and in love. In February of 1930 Livesay wrote:

What I most want to do with my life -- and so, the desire I whisper only to myself -- is first, to teach in a country school, preferably in the West; and secondly to do strictly practical work among the poor of a city. I am suddenly afraid of ambition and wealth. Success does not bring an understanding of life . . . Art no longer matters. I must not let it matter. There is only one way out for me.

Livesay’s convictions about the definitions of womanhood and femininity were consistent with bourgeois convention, with fulfillment through service to others as key. Her writing about eschewing ambition and wealth indicate her sense of being on a threshold, not sure whether she wanted her own career as writer or stifling this and immersing herself in conventional occupations for women: teacher, social worker, wife.

Her journal pages reflect what an immense amount of care and energy this consumed. In March 1929 she wrote: “I think I have found the answer to the question of woman as artist: it cannot be. This is a fearful truth to accept, but it ought to knock the conceit out of me -- a conceit fostered not only by ambition, but by living in a ‘literary family’ -- I pray to escape next year, to go among unknown .

---

[646] The common reference to ‘losing’ one’s virginity indicates a persistent ambivalence associated with successful (as exclusive) heterosexuality.

[647] Livesay fonds, Livesay Journals, 16 February 1930.
people who will not know that I write because it is urgent that I do not become puffed up.” *Green Pitcher* having been published, Livesay was ambivalent about its reception, afraid the book would be received as “charming,” when “[w]hat I long for is power, fire ...”

In her diary Livesay does not record (at least, not directly) her rift with Jim Watts in their second year at university. Yet an entry for 21 March may very well be about Watts. This describes the effect of someone Livesay refers to only as “E” (possibly “Eugenia,” Watts’s first name). The entry describes “E’s” powerful effect on Livesay. Her projected response to “E” entails cultivating an air of dispassion and, above all, forbearance:

> In some extraordinarily subtle way, perhaps without knowing it, E. is malignant. And she always brings out the worst in me, so that with her I lose all my virtue. It is impossible to be honest when everything one says may put one into a trap. It would be better to break it off sharp -- if I have the courage.

Livesay portrays this person – perhaps Watts, perhaps not – as obstructing her own efforts to be disinterested, virtuous and ‘good.’ Rather than enabling her to attain the ascetic and pious air of a *contemplateur* (Livesay was reading Pascal at the time), “E” incites in Livesay images of the person she is trying to overcome or at least to contain.

Livesay wants to get away from her family, her friends, her fellow students, and sees being apart from anyone she knows and who knows her as the way out of her misery. In the following year Livesay repeatedly disavowed her commitment to writing, seeing this as cultivating a self-conceit she claimed to despise. In France, Livesay sought to recreate herself, to write prose (her father’s preferred literary mode) rather than poetry and to immerse herself in the conventions of French small-town life. A year earlier she had written in a journal entry that “[t]errible achings

---

648 Livesay fonds, Livesay Journals, undated [March 1929].
649 Livesay fonds, Livesay Journals, 21 March 1929.
after the power-depriving story-telling possess me. Her effort to write prose during the time she was in France was an effort to claim this power, to record what she observed, dispassionately, not (as with poetry) to chronicle her feelings of disjunction as she tried to engage with the world.

In the spring of 1930 Watts’s discovery of the concept of bisexuality established a sort of compromise with gender, neither a disavowal or embrace of its imperatives, but a workable peace. Livesay writes in her memoir that once back in Toronto and again at the University of Toronto, Watts was “ready to take on the men.” This alignment enabled the two to become friends, but for Livesay it remained an uneasy relationship. Livesay had resisted her own subjection to Watts’s influence. She also resented Watts’s effect on the young men with whom the two socialized.

Livesay describes this period of their passage into heterosexuality as being pivotal for each of them and for their mutual relationship. Despite Watts’s recent crisis, the transition was more difficult for Livesay than Watts. Watts’s heterosexualization did not diminish Livesay’s ambivalent feelings toward her. Instead, it shifted their focus. It was no longer their mutual relationship that caused Livesay’s distress. Rather, the problem lay—ostensibly—with Watts’s relationships with men. As we have seen, Livesay felt she could not compete with Watts’s attractiveness: “There was no way I could be your rival.” Both in her exalted description of her friend’s beauty and her pained exclamation, “how you were hurting me,” Livesay was making a posthumous declaration of love. In this way, she simultaneously expressed and obscured her desire for Watts, hiding it in plain sight as an instance of heterosexual rivalry between women.

---

650 Livesay fonds, Livesay Journals, 20 April 1928.
651 Livesay, *JWMS* 75.
652 Ibid.
Livesay’s memoir can be read as an extended reflection on the impact of sexual difference in her life. She chronicles the happier period of 1930-1 in which she and Watts had embarked on lives as heterosexually-identified women. She does not address the many ways in which Watts actively repudiated gender normativity. Rather, Livesay emphasizes the feminine aspects of Watts’s life by focusing on her relationships to men, her emotional breakdowns and occasionally erratic behaviour, and by feminizing “Jim” as “Gina.” Livesay describes Watts’s abandonment in Paris by her first male lover, Otto Van der Sprenkel, and provides the (unnecessary) information that Watts had children by adoption rather than birth in the course of describing her family’s move from Ontario to British Columbia in the mid 1950s. Inexplicably, Livesay describes Watts’s effect on men as “steals” from herself. Livesay never forgave Watts for having a comradely love affair with Stanley Ryerson after Livesay’s and Ryerson’s own affair was well over. Livesay professes admiration and appreciation for Watts, but these are never unqualified emotions. In almost every description of, or commentary on, Watts there is an ‘on the other hand’ element that undercuts a positive appraisal of her life and work. Near the end of her chapter on “Gina,” Livesay writes: “I admired the way with which you devoted your life to the Ban the Bomb antiwar campaign and to supporting the Voice of Woman movement. Yet it was ironic that your fighting spirit and aggressiveness hardened -- all in the cause of peace! You were hard to live with, Gina, and hard on your own heart. You died too soon.”

Livesay does note Watts’ masculine qualities, using words like “toughness and intransigence,” “aggressiveness” and “hardened.” Watts embodied both masculinity and femininity, ignoring the injunction to be one or the other. Yet Livesay’s descriptions reiterate this injunction by dividing Watts between body and mind, feminine and masculine: here, writes Livesay, was “an uncompromising mind in a

---

653 Livesay, JWMS, 85.
very sensitive and sensual frame.” Livesay loved Watts precisely for her combination of these qualities; she identified with her because of them. But Watts’s combination of masculinity and femininity in one body, of homosexual and heterosexual desire in one heart, also meant Livesay could not (not did not) love her.

Livesay’s account tells us very little about Watts herself, or about the activism to which her friend devoted her time, talents, and money. That Watts was a singularly active and influential element in the socialist and feminist movements in Canada is not acknowledged by Livesay and is actively obscured in her memoirs. In a sense, this emphasis is understandable — after all, Livesay is writing her own story. Yet what we are then left with is a text in which “Watts” is as a highly-crafted symbol, one whose salience reflects the heterosexual imperative, Livesay’s overriding need to fall in love with a man, to become a woman.

Watts’s early importance as a radicalizing influence on Livesay is clear. Their “intense friendship” was indeed over by the time they reconciled in Toronto in the summer of 1930. In her description of this period, Livesay shifts focus from their own relationship to their separate successes and failures as heterosexual women, their relationships with men. It is through these heterosexual relationships that Watts and Livesay mediate their own relationship. Livesay’s ambivalence towards Watts is filtered by their respective heterosexual identifications. What trickles through this account is Livesay’s anger toward and deep attachment to Watts. Unable to acknowledge either openly, Livesay focuses almost relentlessly upon Watts’s failures and inadequacies as a woman, her refusal to identify as a woman, her unwillingness to behave as a woman. Such ‘anomalies’ deeply troubled Livesay. Livesay first severs her relationship to a sexually-nonconforming Watts. She then re-establishes this relationship on the basis of their heterosexual rivalry as women. Their early and intense relationship was a casualty of Livesay’s career as a woman.

654 Livesay, JWMS, 86.
655 Livesay, JWMS, 70
Livesay’s memoir is an effort to place their relationship in the context of her own struggle with and accommodation to the logic of heterosexuality, to understand its significance in her own life. This project means that Livesay could allude to, but never fully acknowledge, Watts’s continued impact upon her own life. She acknowledges Watts’s early influence on her literary and intellectual education, but does not address why Watts—or rather her imagined “Watts”—remained so important to her long after they were no longer close friends. The effort to refuse her identification with Watts and to disavow her attachment to her was consuming and definitive for Livesay. Yet Livesay remained ambivalent—about work, womanhood, art, Watts, motherhood, marriage. In her early journals she often wrote yearningly of reaching a place of equanimity and transcendence. She did not settle for anodyne substitutes. It was the unrelieved anguish of her search that so often lends Livesay’s memoirs an uncanny, intensely melancholic charge.

***

Watts followed a very different path into adulthood—one that Livesay struggled to understand, and which she at times stigmatized. Unlike Livesay, she refused to submit to (much less embrace) conventional bourgeois womanhood. Instead, she subjected her feelings to research, and found some insights in the relatively new psychoanalytic writings on sexuality, chiefly Freud’s, but also the behaviourist B.F. Skinner. She began this process while in California. In contrast, Livesay in France was going through a messier confrontation with sexuality. She describes an overture by Agnes, a young French woman who was staying temporarily at her grandmother’s villa in Aix-en-Provence. They had become very close friends, and Agnes was shortly to leave for school. Agnes explained that she had had to leave her convent school because of intimacies with another student. Livesay describes
Agnes’s unfolding of the story: “The nuns found out and told us we were sinners and must do penance. I was enraged. I threw scenes. They sent me home.”

Livesay continues:

As she revealed this suffering, whispering in the near dark, I felt compassion, but with warning signals of panic. She longed to caress me, but I had to tell her it was unwise, that I did not desire it. For that decision, Madame, her mother, would, I knew, approve of me. Yet how could she know that my “wisdom” was due to fear of the unexplored. The “free” Canadian girl was a novice, a late developer in physical sexual experience.

Livesay described their exchange in a letter to her sister, Sophie, at home in Toronto:

“I’ve been through a siege. But I have made her [Agnes] think, and laid the seeds of continency and reasonableness, I hope . . . I cannot give her wisdom - only experience will do that. I can only tell her she is too old now to get mixed up with a woman.”

Yet it was Livesay who continued to get mixed up with younger women - or at least to incite their passionate advances.

When Livesay left Aix-en-Provence in the spring of 1930 she was joining her father in England. They travelled to the Isle of Wight to visit relatives and there Livesay met her cousin, Pam, for the first time. Livesay didn’t record this in her journal, but sixty years later, in Journey With My Selves, describes her first sexual encounter. Despite the convoluted way it is presented, this account is remarkably vivid in detail and emotional intensity. After a long day of hiking on the Isle of Wight, Livesay and her cousin share a bed in a small inn, their room next to her father’s: “But we were no sooner in bed than we grew awake, alert, laughing and chattering as girls do. When finally there was a lull, Pam said softly: “I’m so glad you came, Dee.” And she laid her hand on my belly.” This line ends the paragraph. The next opens with:

---

656 Livesay, JWMS, 91.
657 Livesay, JWMS, 109-110.
658 Livesay, JWMS, 110.
659 As so often in her memoirs, one notices here that Livesay presents one view, then comments on and qualifies this view in another voice, thus moving between the historical past and her own present.
Tremors seized me. Then they seized her. And before I knew it I was also stroking and caressing her limbs, her breasts; kissing her and leaning to hold her close, body to body. For me it was an utterly new sensation. I cannot speak for her, and I rather suspect that since she had come from an English boarding school she already knew something of these pleasures. But for me, heaven opened.

Despite its candour, there are inconsistencies and inaccuracies in Livesay’s subsequent comments on this event, which gained greater significance the more time elapsed and the further Livesay moved from her “self” of 1930.

Much the same comment could be made about the entire memoir. Livesay acknowledges and revisits people and places she has written about before. That she is not entirely clear, or logical or straightforward, in so many “memories” of her personal life does not likely arise from a conscious attempt to deceive. Such knotted complexities are entirely characteristic of the epistemology of the closet. The incoherences in her account are the ones she lived with and in -- some of them were in fact given weight and substance by the CPC itself -- and they were not consciously articulated. For instance, in the previous chapter of this memoir, titled “Gina,” Livesay describes the impact of Watts’s association with “known lesbians” as distressing and unbearable to think about. In the next chapter, she writes about her own encounter with homosexual desire: “In the days following I had to come to terms with this experience. True, I had had ‘crushes’ on older girls and teachers, when at girls’ school. But I had never then heard of lesbianism, and I had never had any crushes where physical contact had been involved.” Livesay came to “terms” with it, apparently, by denying her experience any enduring significance, and evidently never discussing it, not even with Watts:

I found I was not drawn to Pam as a person to be in love with. She was simply my cousin and my friend. There was not a deeper relationship, at least on my part. Did this mean I was “callow”? Did

---

660 Livesay, JWMS, 122.
this mean on the other hand, that I would never be attractive to
men? In another year’s time I was to find out.

But then Livesay reflects on her own account of the event:

As I reread these passages I ask: is that the whole truth? And I am
bound to say, no! For I do remember a short conversation with
Pam the next day, in which she expressed her devotion to me and in
which I (feeling older and wiser) advised her that we should forget
about the night we had spent together: it was not a good thing. In
saying this I hurt her; I felt myself to be cruel. Yet I believe I took
this stand from lack of understanding, lack of knowledge. Love is
wisdom; and I had not enough love in me, then, to be wise.

This apparently frank reflection actually says very little about what was going on in
Livesay’s efforts to discount this event. At the time Livesay did not and could not
acknowledge this as even potentially an important event or relationship because to
do so would jeopardize her own sexual identity as heterosexual. To countenance the
possibility that Pam’s love for Livesay was, or could ever possibly be, “a good thing”
would have been devastating for Livesay, because it would have called into question
her status as a woman. To explain this in retrospect by saying simply that she did
not “have enough love” in her describes a personal failing, rather than explores a
structuring circumstance, i.e., the injunction against same-sex desire. Even as, sixty
years later and following her own self-identification as bisexual, Livesay reclaims this
moment as a significant event in her life, she resists placing it in any context that
might allow her to understand its fullest implications.

In *Journey With My Selves* Livesay quotes extensively from the letters between
herself and Watts in this period. She doesn’t explicitly refer to Watts’s bisexuality,
although she alludes broadly and heavily to this possibility (as in the passage outlining
her physical traits). For some reason, Livesay wants her readers to know about
Watts’s sexuality, yet she does not want them to know very much. While Livesay
reprints a line in which Watts expresses her unrequited love for Livesay, she does not
quote the letter in which Watts tells her she is bisexual, not homosexual. Livesay’s

---

Livesay, *JWMS*, 122-123. Livesay successfully “lost” her virginity in the summer of 1931.
heavy hinting and allusions to Watts's errant sexuality indicate that Livesay wanted to convey the impression that Watts was lesbian — a word that Watts, to my knowledge, never applied to herself. Livesay is intent on refusing the very fluidity that defined so much of Watt's life.

In each of the early sexual or emotional encounters that Livesay describes in *Journey With My Selves*, she is the older and wiser figure who insists on forbearance and denial. When she published *Journey With My Selves* Livesay was eighty-three years old and had had at least one sustained sexual relationship with a woman. This was in 1979: “[t]his Spring I fell in love with one person; and then I learned to love another. For one there is passion, fascination; for the other, complete physical and psychic immersion. Both these loves are women. It is all new to me, pristine. A spring time of life. Is that what resurrection means? ‘I am the resurrection and the life.’” Yet these belated disclosures and truth-tellings are tentative, incomplete. It is as if Livesay is trying this new self-definition out, as a way of explaining herself to herself. But even in this confessional and ostensibly self-reflective mode, Livesay’s account obscures her relationship with Watts. Highlighting her own cruelty to Pam, or her continence in the face of Agnes’s passion, Livesay does not evoke her own feeling. She is the one who turns her back on these young women’s advances, supposedly for their own benefit.

Livesay makes comments and criticisms about Watts all through this memoir, not only in the chapter devoted to her. As in her recollections of Agnes and Pam, there is an apparent truthfulness and revelatory quality to the memoir. But what do these disclosures reveal? Why does Livesay include them, some for the first time and sixty years later? These encounters did mean much to Livesay, and continued to throughout her life. And despite Livesay’s inference that she now possessed greater love and wisdom, it is clear that when she wrote *Journey With My Selves* she remained

---

equivocal and ambivalent about what these experiences meant. In this carefully-worked memoir there is a sense of disjunction (for the reader) between Livesay’s telling of these stories and the reasons they are important ones for Livesay to tell. Livesay compartmentalizes events and people, so that it is difficult to put the events and people she describes in a context other than the fragmented and very personal one Livesay creates. But some of the inconsistencies seem purposeful, intended to reveal (at least the possibility of) a different story, a story that Livesay is both careful to conceal and anxious to reveal.

Livesay’s two memoirs and many of her interviews, poems and essays are concerned about, even consumed by, Watts. Livesay wrote poems for and about Watts when she was a young girl (published in Green Pitcher and Signpost) and continued to write to and about her for more than twenty years after Watts’s death in 1968. Livesay opens her chapter on Watts, titled “Gina”, with this observation: “Ah Gina, is it only after seventy years of living that I begin to understand you?”

Yet the chapter is not really about understanding “Gina,” but another of Livesay’s efforts to understand her own life. Throughout the memoir, Livesay returns to the issue of “the truth.” In the first chapter she writes of the importance her father placed on the truth, his struggle against his own inhibitions and his wife’s sense of propriety. Perhaps seeing this quest as her father’s legacy, Livesay continued the family struggle. As well as Watts, she returns again and again to the significance of her parents and of their relationship, on her development and her professional ambition and inhibitions. At the end of the first chapter she writes:

My perspective on events and people is undoubtedly lopsided, slanted, with many unavoidable gaps, tempered by my own early view of my parents, brought up as I was with so many inhibitions implanted by my mother and so many ideas of freedom urged by my father. It is small wonder I have found it hard to disclose my inner life to the public. But I am the sum of all these perspectives; what I hope to present, therefore, throughout these pages, is a series of

---

663 Livesay, JWMS, 59.
selves, views of myself. I am not ashamed to set down what seems to be the truth of my parents lives nor what seems to be the truth of the lives of the men and women who have informed my consciousness since leaving the parental fold. These people who have demanded my love and attention have also become a part of me, and to set them down in these pages is not to relinquish them, but to remember. Always with longing, to remember. This is my truth.664

Livesay is always careful to qualify her claims to truthfulness. Few (especially historians) would claim to be able to capture the definitive, final truth about any life. Livesay’s concern is not historical, and it is not the truth of these other lives she is concerned about, but her own — “This is my truth.”

***

It is precisely this “truth” that Judith Butler and queer theory can help us understand. (Of particular interest in this case is her essay, “Melancholy Gender, Refused Identification.”) Butler’s *The Psychic Life of Power* helps us grasp the anguished ambivalence that saturates Livesay’s portrayal of Watts in her memoirs. Livesay’s attempt to pronounce the decisive “truth” about her relationship to Watts illustrates Butler’s argument that subjectivity comes into being through its gendering. In fact, reading Livesay’s memoirs in light of the argument Butler makes in this essay, and throughout all her work, lead to a more sympathetic and critically productive view of Livesay’s “truth.”

*The Psychic Life of Power* addresses the relation between social regulation (power) and psychic life (subjectivity, subjection). Butler places her own work between idealism and materialism.665 She calls for the circumspect handling both of

---

664 Livesay, JWMS, 15.
665 Eve Sedgwick also places her work on performativity between materialism and idealism: “In consonance with my emphasis on the performatives relations of double and conflicted definition, the theorized prescription for a practical politics implicit in these readings is for a multi-pronged movement whose idealist and materialist impulses, whose minority-model and universalist-model
theories that emphasize subjectivity exclusively and also of those that dismiss it altogether, thereby "[underestimating] the linguistic requirements for entering sociality at all." Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993) establish her theory of gender as performative. Her concern is to analyze the constitutive relation between discourse and material reality, between language and social effect. Butler sees theories of social construction as primary not only for understanding reality, but also for attaining insight into the ways discourse sustains, enables and disables the ways we live reality. She does not share the view that because gender and sexuality are "only" socially constructed, they can be shaped and altered as we choose. The essays in *The Psychic Life of Power* elaborate on the material implications of the ways in which bodies are discursively constituted. What we need, in her view, is to analyze social construction as materially constitutive.

Butler's fame as the originator of queer theory (a status shared with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick) is based on her argument that heterosexuality is the formative framework for subjectivity itself, "the matrix through which all willing first becomes possible, its enabling cultural condition. In this sense the matrix of gender relations is prior to the emergence of the 'human.'" To be human is by definition to be either male or female, or to combine both, as in bisexuality, as an embodied duality. The first chapter of *Bodies That Matter* addresses some thorny issues in the debate on constructivism and lays out the ground for Butler's (and Sedgwick's) disagreements

---

667 "Within speech act theory a performative is that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names." Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 13. So, for instance, the notion of sexual difference elaborated in Freud's work has the performative effect of instantiating what it seeks to explain as already (pre-discursively) existing.
668 Raymond Williams made a similar argument in his 1977 *Marxism and Literature*: "Signification, the social creation of meanings through the use of formal signs is then a practical material activity, it is indeed, literally a means of production." Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 38.
with fundamental aspects of feminist theory. Interrogating the “commonsense” view that gender is the socio-cultural organization of sexual difference, Sedgwick in *The Epistemology of the Closet* underlines the “discursive incoherence” that allows the constructive relations between heterosexuality and homosexuality to escape logical analysis, yet be at the same time highly productive of heterosexual hegemony.\(^{670}\)

“Our society,” Sedgwick argues, “could not cease to be homophobic and have its economic and political structures remain unchanged.”\(^{671}\) In related but contrasting ways, Butler and Sedgwick have transformed the study of modern sexuality.\(^{672}\)

The idea that heterosexuality has itself been an important force in the organization of class oppression has not been fully explored by historians of Communism.\(^{673}\) The thrust of queer theory is that the category of sexuality and specifically the concept of homo/heterosexuality *per se* (as distinct from gender) is key for understanding the historical structuration of social inequality and oppression. Butler makes a similar argument. She emphasizes that theories *and* processes of social construction proceed by way of “constitutive constraint.” That is, certain

---


\(^{671}\) See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men, English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 3-4. Kosofsky centers her critical work on the analysis of sexuality rather than gender. She links her work to feminism, but also distinguishes it from this current of thought by foregrounding sexuality rather than gender. The two are not equal or synonymous, and her work traces the ways that ideas about sexuality diverge — structurally and historically — from gender. Her project is to trace sexuality and homophobia as distinct from gender because the two have often been collapsed, with the effect of bracketing our knowledge of their effects. However, Sedgwick acknowledges that the two are a part of one system generating social inequality. She quotes Gayle Rubin, on their co-presence: “The suppression of the homosexual component of human sexuality, and by corollary, the oppression of homosexuals, is . . . a product of the same system whose rules and relations oppress women.” See Gayle Rubin, “The Traffic in Women,” in Rupp (editor), *Toward An Anthropology of Women*, 180.

\(^{672}\) Sedgwick proceeds from the operation of homosexuality in the world, and while her effort to articulate this involves stringent thinking, her argument is ultimately an accessible, almost common sense understanding of homosexuality. In contrast, Butler draws on such philosophers as Hegel and Spinoza in making her argument about recognition and ‘the human.’ The upshot of these arguments is very similar, only Sedgwick’s is perhaps more accessible, more understandable in terms of how we experience sexuality — our own and others’.

\(^{673}\) Guy Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993) stands as an exception. He made an explicit connection between the CP’s emphasis on reproductive heterosexuality and its political shortcomings.
constructions are more basic and productive than others. Gender (with race and class) has been a primary construction shaping the materiality of bodies. Whereas Sedgwick focuses on the homosexual / heterosexual divide as constitutive, Butler focuses on gender as the key element in constructing and sustaining heterosexual hegemony.

In *Bodies That Matter* Butler develops her argument that sex is one of the “norms by which the ‘one’ becomes viable at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility.” She restates this throughout her introduction, describing sex *not* as the pre-discursive material on to which gender is subsequently grafted, but “as a cultural norm which governs the materialization of bodies.” Briefly, she picks up Marx and Engels’s argument that subjectivity and materiality are not opposed as the inner and outer aspects of life. For Butler, material reality is not the substance on which power works, but the common social substance that power produces. For her, “the subject, the speaking ‘I’ is formed by virtue of having gone through such a process of assuming a sex.” It is this process of assuming a sex that Butler addresses more closely in the *Psychic Life of Power*. The crux of Butler’s argument is that gender is not the socio-historical expression of sex, but the “regulatory practice” which instantiates the regulatory ideal of heterosexuality. For Butler, gender is “the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names.”

Her objective is to understand gender as the performative process of anchoring heterosexuality *in* and *as* reality. Butler points out that the power of regulatory norms consists in the fact that in the psychic process of subjection they produce the effects they demand. Rather than choosing masculinity or femininity, heterosexuality or homosexuality, one becomes a subject through the discourses of

---

674 Sedgwick points out that of all the things we could distinguish sexual practice by, such as location, frequency, affective investment, etc., it is the gender of the person with whom we do “it” that is considered socially important and definitive of who we are.

gender and sexuality. The disarmingly simple yet devastatingly confounding psychic and social workings of the heterosexual imperative are seen in Dorothy Livesay’s memoirs. In one sense, her relationships with women were simply a matter of sex. Would she be attractive to men? was the question she asked herself after her first sexual encounter on the Isle of Wight with her cousin. But sex was also the issue as she tried to conceive of her future -- as a woman who wanted to write. Watts made a comment in one of her letters to Livesay early in 1930: “Thank god you won’t become a literary person, but it’s hard for a woman isn’t it[?]” Livesay probably did not want to agree with Watts. She wanted it to be easy to be a ‘woman,’ to submerge herself and her ambition in ‘being a woman’ -- witness her relentless undergraduate drive to fall in love, to be possessed, and to relinquish her egoistic writerly ambitions. Livesay admired Virginia Woolf (she even wrote her a fan letter) but disagreed with Woolf’s view that in order for a woman to get her own work done, the ‘angel in the house’ had to be throttled. As a young heterosexual woman, Livesay wanted to be both angel and artist.

Livesay’s memoirs and journals illustrate Butler’s argument about the formative effect of the discursive constraint against homosexuality in the achievement of gendered subjectivity. Livesay’s rift with Jim Watts in 1928-1929, and her ‘wise’ repudiation of Agnes’s and Pam’s advances, were pivotal moments in her assumption of womanhood. Subjectivity proceeds through the assumption of normative practices that are sexed. One establishes or lays claim to cultural intelligibility, and is recognized as a subject, to the extent that one identifies oneself with a culturally intelligible place and practice. One can certainly identify oneself in defiance of the conventions of gender and sex, as Watts did. But it is in accordance

---

676 Livesay fonds, Watts to Livesay, 3 March 1930.
677 Woolf’s compelling case against the angel in the house might have helped Livesay. However, though Woolf first made this in a lecture, “On Professions for Women,” in 1931, it was not published as an essay until 1942, in her posthumous collection, The Death of the Moth and Other Essays.
678 Livesay’s comment on her reaction at the time to Watt’s being on the verge of a lesbian affair was “I hated to think of it.” Livesay, JWMS, 71.
with, or defiance of, these conventions that identification proceeds, never apart from them. Bodies become masculine and feminine in relation to the regulatory practices of heterosexuality. Gender establishes (rather than reflects) what is human through the exclusions it establishes and the either/or logic it asserts. Gender is constitutive, Butler argues, because subjection proceeds in relation to it, on and in its terms. To reject these terms actively, or to fail to appropriate them adequately, sets one outside the bounds of cultural intelligibility. Butler uses the term “abject” to describe the condition of being outside of intelligibility. Within these parameters of gender, by contrast, one is made legible and supported within the bounds of the cultural logic that is sustained by its endless citation.

The psychic life of power is achieved through processes of identification that are always double-sided. What is externalized as oneself is also the result of internalizing what is beyond oneself. Butler is careful to distance herself from the argument that subjectivity is entirely dependent on or coterminous with the regulatory regimes (such as race, class and gender) that mobilize it. The process of citation in which these regimes are made real contains the possibility of resignification, but, in the case of gender, always in relation to the grammar of sex. The possibility of agency consists in the relations between materiality and subjectivity, the fact that each is manifested only in and through the other, in the moment of citation. Hence Butler’s point that performativity is not an ‘act’ but a continual reiteration of norms. The performativity of power (and of subjectivization) means that Butler rethinks “agency as a reiterative or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to power.”

How does this relate to Livesay and Watts over the course of 1928 to 1939, before and during the period they were both active in the Communist Party? Watts was an odd Communist. Her politics as a Communist had a lot in common with what

has subsequently become known as queer politics. She persistently contested the categories of identity — notably but not only those relating to gender — as the basis of political organization and change. Watts accepted the Party leadership and worked productively within its boundaries — yet, especially in the Popular Front, she also stretched these boundaries. She engaged in a politics that cut across categories of class, gender and race to broaden the support for socialism. She mined such categories in order to make socialism a more viable and popular politics. Watts took advantage of Popular Front politics to rearticulate what socialism meant. She expanded its definitions beyond the border of class-based, male-defined politics, and situated the need for socialism in the immediate and urgent context of everyday life. Livesay was also empowered within the Popular Front. Yet the logic of her empowerment worked quite differently. It was predicated not on what Livesay did, but on who she was (or, more precisely, with whom she identified). In other words, the movement changed and Livesay was able to find, for a short time, a happier place in it.

Politics is about determining, and contesting, who matters. Ultimately, Livesay’s politics did not alter or broaden the prevailing sense of who matters, whose life is important. But Watts’s form of politics did. And it is instructive to realize that Watts in the late 1930s was already moving beyond identity as the basis of emancipatory politics. We can recover these lost emancipatory politics by closely reading documents of the Communist movement and memoirs such as Livesay’s, paying attention to ways their meanings are shaped. It is important to de-familiarize them, to remain mindful that we do not know the past. Watts, the activist, was willing to negotiate her relationships, her investment in politics and the CPC and in the cultural movement in ways that were unorthodox and creative. Livesay, the artist, struggled terribly (and at times violently) with her (bourgeois) culture and with what it meant to be a woman. She was palpably threatened by the uncertainties that
Watts embodied. Adhering closely to that Communist Party script that Watts was “queering,” Livesay believed in sex as identity and power and felt endangered by those whose identification as masculine or feminine was ambiguous or equivocal.

Here it is helpful to remember Livesay’s own attempts to analyze her ‘identity.’ Livesay uses ‘ego’ as a general concept, an animating force that she is divided from and critical of (“amusing — and dangerous.”) Livesay characterizes her ego as operating, in some ways, against her own wishes and interests (tending to repress a normal heterosexual desire). Her agonized reflections bear out Butler’s point that both the regulatory law (heterosexuality) and subjectivity (Livesay’s “ego”) are made material through citation and reiteration as identification. Butler draws on the Lacanian notion of asujetissement to describe identification. Butler’s insight into identification provides a useful key to understanding what was going on for both Livesay and Watts in their first years at university, as they moved away from being exceptionally close to each other to a far more ambivalent and conflicted friendship defined in relation to men. This process involved the recrafting of who they were. Butler understands ‘identification’ not as mirroring or asserting, but as engaging, on psychic and bodily levels that are never clearly distinguishable: “[i]dentification is used here not as an imitative activity by which a conscious being models itself after another; on the contrary, identification is the assimilating passion by which an ego first emerges. Freud argues that ‘the ego is first and foremost a bodily ego.’”

Identification, as passion, compels one to make the effort to move toward, to assimilate something or someone that is not a part of oneself. Subjectivization is possible only through the engagement with and assimilation of otherness.

---

682 This is the basis of Butler’s criticism of identity politics. Its strategy turns subjectivity into an oppositional phenomenon. One can claim one’s identity only in opposition to a static ‘other’ that one is not.
For Butler power exists in the achievement of a sexed body, an achievement that is itself based on identificatory practices that are consistent with the heteronormative logic and structure of gender. The politics of heterosexual hegemony are articulated in terms of what heterosexuality is not, through what it can or rather, must not be, in order to be itself. The constitutive constraint at the centre of heterosexual identity is that it is entirely unlike and unrelated to homosexual identity and homosexual desire. There is more to Butler’s argument than the observation that the achievement of heterosexuality requires the abandonment of homosexual attachments. If it were so, Livesay could have simply mourned the loss of her early bond with Watts, and moved on, confident in the wisdom of her choice. Rather, the logic of heterosexual hegemony is built on the constitutive constraint against homosexual attachment and desire. And so the achievement of heterosexuality can proceed only by “preempting the possibility of homosexual attachment, a foreclosure of possibility which produces a domain of homosexuality understood as unlivable passion and ungrievable loss.”

Livesay’s extraordinary texts, which simultaneously marginalize and obsess over Watts, bear out Butler’s theorization of gender.

The distinction between homosexuality and heterosexuality is created in and by discourses such as psychoanalysis and so Butler approaches psychoanalytic texts as discourse. In keeping with her argument on power as performative, Butler asks not only what the texts say, but what they do. Such texts (most notably for Watts and Livesay, Freud’s Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality) perform — rather than merely denote — the distinction between heterosexuality and homosexuality (“a distinction which, after all, has no necessity.”) Butler’s argument on subjectivization and the relation between gender and heterosexuality in this process is based on her analysis of Freud’s texts because his work “articulates a cultural logic whereby gender is

achieved and stabilized through heterosexual positioning, and where threats to heterosexuality thus become threats to gender itself. Psychoanalysis has produced performative discourses such as ‘the law of the father’, the ‘symbolic order,’ and ‘the phallus.’ Butler proposes that we understand such discourses not as more or less accurate, but as “a series of normativizing injunctions that secure the borders of sex through the threat of psychosis, abjection, psychic unlivability.” As performatives, the injunction of the law instantiates the rules it creates. To live (to be culturally intelligible) within the cultural logic these discourses create is a matter of complying with (that is, citing) their norms and conventions. Butler’s discussion of gender as melancholic is undertaken in order to address “the predicament of living in a culture which can mourn the loss of homosexual attachment only with great difficulty.”

The nub of Butler’s argument is the importance of homosexuality’s exclusion to sustaining heterosexual hegemony, the imperative of an active and constant disavowal of homosexual attachment. Gender is, as Butler portrays it, the performance of this disavowal. Melancholy — the psychic incorporation of a loss, a repudiated attachment — is central to identifying as feminine or masculine, performatively disavowing an attachment that can never be simply forgotten. Femininity (that which Livesay longed to attain) is “formed (taken on, assumed) through the incorporative fantasy by which the feminine is excluded as a possible object of love, an exclusion never grieved, but ‘preserved’ through heightened feminine identification.” Livesay could never “get over” Watts, nor could she grieve her loss, since this would have meant acknowledging an attachment that imperiled her own femininity.

Ibid., 146.
In her chapter in *Journey With My Selves* on “The Writing Game,” Livesay claims that Watts’s influence on her development as a poet was far greater than that of her parents:

What kept me humming was writing that my mother never saw, jealously guarded in scribblers at school and shown only to Gina — satirical sketches of classmates and teachers with apostrophes to our latest crushes. I was no longer lonely. I had an audience, a kindred spirit, to use L.M. Montgomery’s revered phrase: Gina, the beautiful, wild tomboy, who led me down paths my mother knew nothing about. . . . Gina’s special influence on my writing came from her passionate interest in poetry.688

Livesay’s depiction of the relationship between herself and Watts can be read as an illustration of the importance of attachment and identification with others in the formation of subjectivity, in our development as reflective, critical and creative persons. Livesay’s account of their relationship also depicts how heterosexuality as a regulatory regime produces gendered lives, and how the acceptance of sexual difference as the terms for living makes only some lives livable, at the cost of others’ lives. Butler’s argument on the necessity of our attachment to others in the formation of subjectivity/subjectivization establishes intersubjectivity as fundamental to intrasubjectivity, or attachment to selfhood. The viability of one’s life is established through one’s relation (attachment) to others. Her argument about melancholy gender is that heterosexual hegemony is sustained through the refusal to acknowledge / recognize the possibility of homosexual attachment. As Butler puts it, one is a woman only to the degree that one does not desire a woman. Homosexual attachment can be understood from within this logic only as the failure to be/become a heterosexual woman. The achievement of a gendered subject-position is the citation or reiteration of the injunction against homosexuality.

---

688 Livesay, *JWMS*, 90.
That her memoir is a “truth” particular to Livesay is most evident in her account of Watts, and especially in her summation of Watts at the end of the chapter on her in *Journey With My Selves*. There Livesay reproduces an interview Watts gave to a young radical (Charles Boylan) in 1967, one year before she died. The interview was part of the young radical’s research for a thesis on Dorothy Livesay’s work as an activist poet. In her memoir, Livesay excerpts a short exchange that she presents as expressive of Watts. Watts takes issue with the terms of Boylan’s questions:

Interviewer: Do you think [Dorothy Livesay] represents the woman’s point of view?
JW: For me that’s a rather meaningless generalization. I don’t know what the woman’s point of view is.
Interviewer: Well, then, a woman’s point of view.
JW: Well, obviously she represents a woman’s point of view!
Interviewer: Take the love poetry at the end of her last book, do you identify with it, understand it?
JW: Yes, certainly. But can’t men identify with it, too? I mean, is love poetry so divided between the sexes? Such things are only significant to women? I don’t think so, but then of course I’m not a man.689

Watts’s challenge to the qualifications and gendered conjugations of Boylan’s questions was part of her larger refusal of gender (and sexuality) as identification. She also challenged Boylan’s effort to rephrase the question and obscure these connotations. Livesay presumably chose this encounter as evocative of Watts’s vigilant resistance to facile (and sexist) generalization and categorization. The exchange — and Livesay’s decision to include it in her summation of Watts — conveys the importance Watts placed on refusing these categories and the understandings they convey. It also shows the attention that Watts and Livesay both paid not only to what is said but how it is said. It might even be Livesay’s roundabout way of

689 Livesay Fonds, Charles Boylan, Interview with Watts, April 1967.
acknowledging that Watts, if she were alive, would have disputed Livesay’s depiction of their relationship and of Watt’s life.

It was only in the pages of Livesay’s memoirs that Watts could be tailored to fit a “truth” she would not have countenanced and in which her defiance of the “law” of gender was posthumously punished. Wherever possible, Watts challenged categories of understanding that relied on differences of class, race and sex. Her work in the CPC, the Theatre of Action, in Spain during the Civil War, and subsequently in the Voice of Women and the peace movement, followed a line that began with her early refusal of the limitations of identity and identity-based politics. Far more than stemming from her ability to adhere to the latest Communist “line change,” Watts’s effectiveness arose from her efforts to bridge difference, to incorporate contradiction in order to establish a politics (and an equality) that did not rely on opposition.

Dorothy Livesay may not have realized that her need to fall in love with a man in her first years at university was definitive for her future as a writer. She became a writer who wrote often and ambivalently about sexual difference, about being a woman, and about being a writer. Watts did not engage in this struggle and her collapse in the winter of 1929-30 was certainly linked to the strain she was under not just scholastically but existentially. Livesay’s paraphrase of Watts’s dilemma in 1928 — “Her passionate need is to write, but she says that she cannot” — suggests that it was not a matter of talent that kept Watts from expressing herself, but of intelligibility. What can be articulated within a cultural and political logic keyed to heterosexual hegemony is (only) heterosexual desire and identification. Although she often casts Watts in a rescue narrative, Livesay also gives her credit for finding her way out of grim situations. Watts’s avowal of bisexuality in the spring of 1930 was perhaps an example of this tenacity. Livesay’s memoir makes much of Watts’

---

690 Livesay, JWMS, 64.
sexualization in this year (“avid for love and sex”) but it was more her friend’s introduction to Marxism and Soviet socialism over the same year that became, for Watts, the basis for her passionate engagement with and continued development in the world. Over the next ten years she did many things as a Communist, including journalism. As a member of the CPC Watts could, and did, write — as J. Watts, and sometimes even as “a woman.” Livesay’s persistent effort is to remove Watts from the context of her chosen field of political and cultural activism and to set her in the context of sex and sex-based politics. Watts resisted this identification throughout her life. Admiring of Livesay’s poetry, she was less enamoured of her former comrade’s political awareness; she perceived Livesay to be both dogmatic and didactic.

The last lines of the chapter on “Gina” in Journey With My Selves are these: “[I]n the thirties and forties you were the New Woman. Disagree as we did, your vibrant pace swung me along the same road.” Describing Watts in these terms fit with Livesay’s story of her own development as a writer and her involvement in political activism, her ambivalent identification with middle-class womanhood (and its “clinging vine myth”) as well as the more feminist notions of “New Womanhood”. But what may fit Livesay’s “truth” entails a discursive disservice (almost a violence) in the case of Watts. In this framework Watts is fixed as a middle-class, feminist crusader, a depiction that obscures (but doesn’t erase) the substance of what Watts accomplished, as a Communist, a writer, a cultural organizer.

Watts resisted the imperative to make gender and sexuality personally or socially definitive. Watts knew she was a woman, but did not make ‘womanliness’ the basis of her work in any definitive sense, politically, culturally or socially. (One notices that her remark in the interview was “I’m not a man.” Significantly, she did

691 In 1966 Watts established the Victoria, British Columbia branch of the Voice of Women.
693 Livesay, JWMS, 87.
not say, “I am a woman.”) Watts’s relation to the narrative of new womanhood (as well as to that of working-class womanhood) was (like her marriage to Lon Lawson) an open one. Livesay’s summary invocation of Watts as “the New Woman” reflects her own desire to close the book on Watts, to pin her to a place in history. Yet, rather than such closure, Watts’s example urges us to consider the question at the centre of Judith Butler’s work: “what kind of subversive repetition might call into question the regulatory practice of identity itself?” Watts lived between categories, and embodied both masculinity and femininity. Livesay’s 1991 memoir attempts a last, heroic effort to come to terms with possibilities of love and connection that haunted her, to overcome the uneasy sense that she could have done things differently. Yet Journey With My Selves is ultimately a record of alienation, loss and disconnection. And as such, it is an eloquent argument for living otherwise. “Perhaps,” Judith Butler adds, “only by risking the incoherence of identity is connection possible.”

---

694 Judith Butler, Gender Trouble, 42.
695 Judith Butler, Bodies That Matter, 149. Eve Sedgwick makes a similar, crucial, point about risky identifications: “it’s only by being shameless about risking the obvious that we happen into the vicinity of the transformative.” Ève Kosofsky Sedgwick, The Epistemology of the Closet, 22.
Conclusion

...sexuality, in modern Western culture the most meaning-intensive of human activities. 696

The Left has historically been receptive to understanding sexuality as a political as well as individual matter, yet this insight has remained marginal to most critical analyses of twentieth-century Communism. The close study of how Communist women negotiated gender and sexuality with reference to the demands of the Party and the wider world tells us new things about them and their movement.

In the 1930s the Communist Party of Canada, although still fairly small, became a surprisingly powerful element in Canadian politics and culture. Official and unofficial histories of communism in Canada have depicted the movement as industrial, trade-based and largely ethnic. In contrast to these interpretations, this dissertation has followed a different line of inquiry into the CPC of the 1930s. It has highlighted the involvement of middle-class intellectuals and artists in the movement, and specifically female activists engaged in cultural work in support of the CPC’s program.

Initially basing their work on the Third Period understanding of proletarian culture as the means of exposing and overturning capitalist domination, such middle-class activists developed an understanding of culture in general as a key mediating element in political change.697 As Fascism menaced the very survival of the Soviet Union, and presented a version of culture as power, prescription, and destiny, Communists transitioned from hailing the transformative revolutionary destiny of

696 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Tendencies, 23.
697 Lenin’s own views of the “correct” Communist orientation to cultural work can be found in Lenin, “On Proletarian Culture,” written 8 October 1920. See V.I. Lenin, Collected Works 31 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, fourth English edition, 1965), 316-317: “1) All educational work in the Soviet Republic of workers and peasants, in the field of political education in general and in the field of art in particular, should be imbued with the spirit of the class struggle being waged by the proletariat for the successful achievement of the aims of its dictatorship, i.e., the overthrow of the bourgeoisie, the abolition of classes, and the elimination of all forms of exploitation of man by man.”
proletarian culture, narrowly defined, to emphasizing the potential of broadly-conceived progressive cultural work. In this new framework, the middle-class intellectuals’ “in-between” position, once derided as an indication of their superfluity or imminent disappearance, came to be acclaimed as a crucial element of Popular Front struggle. As cultural activists and producers, middle-class members and fellow travelers of the CPC embodied the historical necessity of socialism.

In the context of the Depression, many middle-class artists and intellectuals in the 1930s saw communism and socialism not only as the way out of the crisis but as a renewal of the connections between art and life. This sense of looking backward, of yearning for a supposed connection that had been lost in what many perceived as an increasingly anomie society, had been sidelined by ‘scientific socialism’ and the emphasis on class conflict and revolutionary politics during the Third Period. It re-emerged forcefully in Popular Front politics after 1935, when it came to be viewed as a legitimate element of left-wing political and cultural work. In this sense much of the cultural wing of the socialist movement in the Popular Front was animated as much by revolutionary romanticism as by scientific socialism – and this sensibility was actively encouraged by the policies adopted by the Comintern between 1935 and 1939.698

This changing balance between the revolutionary and romantic elements of the movement can be discerned at the highest levels of the world Communist movement. It can also be traced in the politics of its loyal Canadian followers. These were worked out, and subtly transformed, on both the national and then the individual level. As members developed their skill and knowledge, their style of politics and cultural work shifted. Recapturing a fuller sense of this period relies on gaining a sense of the convergence of these levels in creating both possibilities and

---

698 One of the most important of these new developments was a post-1935 emphasis on tradition, national history and folklore as important resources for building support for socialism. A fuller exploration of these themes lies outside the scope of this thesis.
necessities. The Popular Front endowed middle-class members of the CPC with a sense of their distinct role within the movement, their importance as a link between past and future, and a transfer point between a class culture that had reached its developmental limit and a ‘people’s culture’ which could only unfold in socialism. The CPC thus had a lot to offer the middle-class cultural producers responding to its call. At the same time, I would argue, their identification with the CPC gave the Party enormous advantages. And this was especially the case because of the historical association of the middle class with the romantic notion of the heterosexual family as a microcosm of society. Thus a distinctly gendered and heteronormative idea of the middle-class family as emblematic of democracy, nationality, history and indeed socialism became a part of the Popular Front’s case. The legitimacy of working-class politics was established through metaphors of birth, vitality and progress (as opposed to Fascism’s death, decadence and reaction.) Especially in the Popular Front the Party was portrayed as the champion of the healthy (heterosexual) progressive family. Party policy and objectives were cast in a heteronormative idiom as blunt as it was powerful. In this thesis, I have demonstrated that the CPC incorporated a hierarchical, exclusive and masculinist vision of gender and sexuality into its understanding and practice of politics. The politics of class, as both a basis for action and a category of analysis, relied on the work of gender and sexuality as metaphor and imagery throughout CPC discourse.

In contrast to its policies on racial equality and Black nationalism, on religious freedom and national liberation, the CPC was actively homophobic. It persistently portrayed itself and communism as the healthy opposite of homosexual / reactionary decadence. The CPC became dependent on a masculinist ethos of community in which women and femininity occupied an adjunct, yet essential, position: symbolically potent but politically marginalized. Sexuality and gender as such possessed no analytic purchase in what was being reformulated at the time as
Marxism-Leninism, yet both were formative elements of the 1930s Communist movement. Earlier reforms in the Soviet Union had been implicitly predicated on the revolutionary idea that women and homosexuals are not fundamentally different from men and heterosexuals. In the 1930s this revolutionary idea was repudiated, with the re-criminalization of sodomy and the withdrawal of legal, accessible, safe abortion.

The CPC borrowed from the discursive power attached to bourgeois conventions of gender and sexuality as part of its effort to secure the international legitimacy of the Soviet Union and its own political survival. The tropes of family, nation and progress represented this power. These became the important, and in some respects dominant, symbols of the Canadian Communist movement in this crucial decade of the CPC’s history. The possibility of socialism seemed close at hand in the 1930s. It evaporated in the years following the Second World War, when Cold War politics tightened the link between the regulation of sexuality and the ruling political order. Communists were targeted for their supposed sexual as well as political difference. Perhaps Communists faltered, in Canada and around the world, partly because they were not different enough from the bourgeois world they challenged. Having tied themselves to an appropriation of heteronormativity and the patriarchal family as a model and metaphor for Communism’s present and future, and having shifted their movement from a revolutionary to a progressive framework, they could no longer claim the rhetorical leverage needed to decenter bourgeois hegemony.

In the face of the danger Fascism posed to the Soviet Union and to international socialism, the CP moved revolutionary class politics into the shadows of peace and political progress. In the Popular Front period, middle class members such as Livesay and Watts helped the Party downplay class-based politics in favour of
a politics of progressivism whose thrust consisted of the defence of family and nation.

Ironically, Eugenia (a.k.a. Jean, a.k.a. Jim) Watts and Dorothy (a.k.a. Dee) Livesay were themselves ambivalently attached to these conventions. They sought to evade or at least blunt their effects in their own lives -- becoming, for instance, Party activists and organizers, filling roles few other women could or sought to fill. Their interest in cultural and intellectual work within a movement often focused on organizing industrial labour meant that their work during the Third Period had been largely devoted to agitational propaganda, dramatizations of Party policy and doctrine. In agitprop and in Masses, their participation in building a workers’ culture was based, not so much on a positive celebration of a working-class culture they knew first-hand, but rather on their rejection of the bourgeois culture within which they had been raised. They joined the Party because they both supported its politics, and saw it doing the best work in support of workers. Yet they had very different fates within the Party, and different relations with its authority and leadership structure.

Empowered by the Party, their objectives were political and their means were narrative and dramatic forms of expression. Neither was typical of their class or gender; neither identified with domesticity or with the family per se. Yet they were not expressing their own views on womanhood or their own lives as women, or indeed saying anything concretely about ‘women’ per se in their work as CPC members. Rather, it was the CPC’s version of dominant ideas of women and womanhood that they put to work in support of the Party and the Popular Front Against Fascism.

Watts probably enjoyed her work in the CPC more than Livesay. She also enjoyed her role as wife and mother more than Livesay. She managed to build a marriage that accommodated her bisexuality, and became devoted to raising her two
children. Her husband remained a comrade in every sense, long after they had left the CPC. In contrast, Livesay’s marriage, in 1937, was largely conventional and unhappy -- until the death of her husband in 1951. Livesay more than Watts was susceptible to the blandishments of ideal womanhood. She was drawn to the ideals of a happy immersion in the family, social fulfillment through service to others, and financial security. Notwithstanding the way Livesay would represent her friend in her memoirs, it was actually Watts who found some fulfillment in each of these areas. As a wife and mother, Livesay evidently achieved little lasting happiness or peace. It was as a poet that she made her mark.

It is difficult to summarize the mark that Jim Watts made. Her work has been obscured both by and within CPC history. Her identification with the Communist movement was definitive but also deeply problematic. She has not been claimed as emblematic of CPC politics in part because, living outside of the heteronormative order the Party was working so sedulously to defend and promote, she flouted gender and sexual convention. She was not, in the Party’s terms, a good woman. She was a good and deeply committed communist. She was also unrepentantly bourgeois, bohemian and bisexual. Watts gave everything she had (and in every sense this was a lot) to the Communist movement: money, time, talent, hope and faith. Yet she figures in the Party’s story only marginally, sometimes mentioned in memoirs as a charming and wealthy young woman bent on giving her money to Party causes and to friends in need. She is remembered outside Communist circles as a young woman swept up in the “spirit” of the times, and especially in the Spanish Civil War. Her politics and her considerable work are summed up in this world as “youthful idealism” – a dismissal of her investment in Communism as a more rational and humane system.
In a 1978 recollection of Norman Bethune, Stanley Ryerson, a man greatly loved by both Livesay and Watts, captured some of the spirit of the Popular Front era:

Today, in retrospect, the 1930s policy of the united front against fascism is vehemently called in question by some on the extreme Left who see in it a departure from “revolutionary class positions”: antifascism as an opportunist substitute for class struggle. That’s not the way we saw it. Organizing workers’ unity in action as the base for a broad alliance to resist fascism was the class struggle in the real context of the epoch.

Ryerson’s comment here suggests that in 1978 he felt a lack of political solidarity on the Canadian left, the absence of a foundation on which to build understanding and recapture a sense of common cause, the sense of the Popular Front. The political solidarity which had sustained left solidarity around anti-fascism — and note Ryerson doesn’t call it the Popular Front — had been badly fractured by the postwar Cold War, and also grievously damaged by the ostensibly friendly criticism of the New Left. Ryerson elaborates on the relation of class politics and anti-fascism:

The fascist Axis of Berlin, Rome, Tokyo, was the core of big business counter-revolution on the international arena, the polarized concentration of all that was most reactionary on earth. That its proclaimed aim was to “destroy bolshevism”, and that this aim was congenial to the reactionary ultra-Right in the Western countries (hence “appeasement”), expressed the class character and objectives of the Axis powers.

As Ryerson suggests, much of the logic of the new dispensation originated in the changed character of world politics. Yet how this transition was effected, indeed lived, on the national and local level made an enormous difference. In her work as an organizer and cultural activist, what Watts accomplished was shaped by the immediate needs of the movement and the CPC. But in a wider sense, for Watts,

---

Wendell MacLeod, Libbie Park, Stanley Ryerson, Bethune: The Montreal Years, An Informal Portrait (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1978), 145. Ryerson’s argument here echoes Watts’s 1934 article in the Young Worker, confirming the tenacity of CPC members’ commitment to the Soviet Union as the model for socialism.
Communism offered the possibility of re-defining social relationships, the possibility of re-creating social life in a way that enhanced individual potential. When the CPC began to enunciate a new politics of overcoming class difference, in the interests of a more general campaign to save the Soviet Union, Watts was completely engaged by the newly expansive politics.

The recognition of class as a relationship of social forces has obvious parallels to all other constitutive relationships, including gender. The sense of class as a relationship (rather than an identity) is the idea of class relations as historically constitutive, not only of class difference itself, but in every aspect of social existence. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler focus on sexuality and gender as political forces that are rhetorically deployed in making meaning at every level of personal and social interaction. The relationship between ‘normal’ heterosexuality and ‘abject’ homosexuality constitutes the character of each. More importantly, such a configuration positions homosexuality as that which one defines oneself against, that sexuality which one emphatically is not, would never be.

In the reasoning of queer theorists, culture comes to be conceptualized as the set of meanings and rhetorical devices through which we share the world and negotiate our place in it (or refuse to share the world and insist upon a privileged place within it). What is most important for this dissertation is this sense of culture as enabling or disabling the sense of place that a particular individual, in this case Watts, might have enjoyed within a culture and community. It was at the level of culture that Watts came up against her dislocation, as a woman who desired women (and would not disavow this desire). And it was at this level of culture that Watts sought to create change, to build a new society. The dislocation that Watts experienced in relation to her sexuality was formative for her commitment to radical politics.
Yet in its efforts to gain political legitimacy and power, the Party mirrored the dynamics of modern sexual definition and asserted itself in terms of the same normative structures that it had earlier challenged. This narrowed rather than expanded the possibility of moving beyond heteronormative models of relationship, such as dominant and subordinate, or leader and led. Family and heteronormativity played increasingly prominent roles in the Party’s public self-definition. Both were shaped by the same ‘open secret’ of homosexuality as constitutive of heterosexual identity and order, a system claiming its radical purity and singular rectitude by defaming or excluding its essential other. Despite differences between Watts and the Party, she believed in its program and accepted its leadership as key to creating the new culture she sought.

In her role as a prominent member of the CPC, and in her work as a journalist and organizer, Watts accepted and used the strategic deployment of traditional notions of family and femininity as a way to build support for socialism. And Watts simulated these ideas in her own life: her marriage was, to all appearances, conventional, the work she did in the communist movement was feminine insofar as it was supportive and directed to the betterment of others. Yet she also signaled her distance from conventional sexuality and middle-class morality, by dressing as a man, having affairs, and undertaking assignments not usually given women. In many ways, Watts personified the characteristics of a “good woman” but one who dressed — and sometimes acted — like a man. Certainly she was protected by her wealth; class privilege gave her a freedom few others enjoyed. She was not protected, however, from scrutiny and censure. In her own affairs, Watts did not flout the conventions of sexual propriety. She simply ignored them. And on a prosaic level, so too did the Party. Watts identified with the CPC as a good Communist, not as a woman who did not follow the conventions of gender or sexuality. Her
commitment to Communism took form as a sort of strategic essentialism, where she presented herself as a conventional woman on behalf of the Party.

In contrast to the ubiquitous references in CPC commentary and criticism to the feathered pumps, pink cushions, and perverse desires of the bourgeoisie, members of the CPC were rarely sexualized. When they were, it was in highly normative terms, as in Annie Buller’s memorial tribute to Beckie Buhay as the personification of a womanly woman. The CPC’s insistence upon sexual normalcy, and the discrete silence around members’ deviations from it, was not primarily about actual sexual identities or adventures. It was about the politics of conventional sexuality, about not being associated with the negative side of the definitional divide between progressive and decadent, and about staking a claim to the symbolic leverage attached to heterosexuality. Relations of exclusion and domination shaped the CPC’s “oppositional” efforts to create political change, just as these relations shaped the discourse they challenged.

Watts’s relationship to the Party was very important for her sense of herself and for her politics in its broadest sense. But she did not assign personal or social responsibility to the Party. She did not subsequently claim to have been deceived, as did Livesay and other members who eventually left the CPC. Watts embodied queer politics in the sense that the period of her greatest effectiveness was one in which it was possible to reject either/or politics. If one identifies ‘queer’ as related to the acknowledgement and embrace of fluidity, Popular Front politics certainly qualifies. This era of left politics implicitly questioned the thesis that ‘truth’ and ‘progress’ are unitary, clearly defined and possess clear borders demarcating them from their opposite. Debate has been intense around the meaning and effect of the shift to the

700 Kenny Collection, Mss. 179, Box 41, Annie S. Buller, “In Memory of Beckie Buhay,” In her eulogy, Buller paraphrases a tribute from a Saskatchewan comrade: “Beckie’s personality disproves the opinion of some people that politics tend to make women ‘hard-boiled’. There was nothing hard-boiled about Beckie Buhay. She did not need that tawdry unfeminine gimmick. I never left her company without feeling that Beckie Buhay was not only a great political leader [but] a very womanly woman as well.” See also, in the same file, Beckie Buhay, “Happy Families are a Country’s Best Investment,”
Popular Front in Canada and the U.S. Was it a necessary strategy or a ‘sell-out’ of class politics? Was it a top-down initiative imposed on party activists and members? Was it the flowering of an indigenous swell of inter-class support for socialism? The effort to answer these questions has led to the illumination and analysis of connections between culture and politics. My focus here has been on the work of gender within this relation, and on the importance of sexuality as the discursive framework in which political and cultural meanings are made and re-made, and the affiliation between heterosexuality and political legitimacy maintained. In the shift between the Third Period and the Popular Front the conventions of gender took on a new importance in the CPC’s formulation and articulation of social relations. Through the gendered discourse of family and heterosexuality the Party identified itself with a vision of social relations as stable, conventional, progressive and safe. Watts’ part in this transition was not emblematic of the fate of women as members and activists in the CPC. Rather, she is a particularly clear illustration of gender as a dynamic dimension in which sexual, social and political meaning is continuously established and constantly challenged.

Our ideas about feminist practice are becoming broader and more dynamic, and we recognize in Watts an earlier version of the concerns, interests and obstacles articulated as new by feminists today. These centre, generally speaking, on a pivotal question: How may one live a independent, creative and productive life? Finding a satisfactory answer has been especially difficult for left-wing women. Yet the difficulties and pitfalls of social engagement and political activism are not women’s only. They confront anyone seeking to live as fully as possible.
Bibliography

Manuscript Archival Sources


Journals and Newspapers

Canadian Tribune (Toronto), 1953.

Clarion (Toronto).

Daily Clarion (Toronto).

Daily Worker (New York City), 1935.

Masses (Toronto)

New Frontier (Toronto)

Worker (Toronto)

Young Worker (Toronto).

Books and Articles


Carr, Sam. *From Opposition to Assassination, the Story of Trotsky and the Trial of His Terrorist Group*. N.p. [Toronto], 1936.


Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy. *Listen In! EAQ, Madrid, Spain, Hear Dr. Norman Bethune, Prof. J. B. S. Haldane, Hazen Sise*. Toronto: Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy, n.d. [1937].


Hannant, Larry. The Infernal Machine: Investigating the Loyalty of Canada's Citizens. Toronto:
University of Toronto Press, 1995.


Innis, Mary Quayle. “Staver.” *New Frontier* 1, 1 (April 1936).


Irvine, Dean. "Among Masses: Dorothy Livesay and the English Canadian Leftist Magazine


Livesay, Dorothy et al. "Dorothy Livesay Issue." *Room of One's Own* (Growing Room Collective) 5, No. 1/2.


Molinaro, Dennis. “A Species of Treason?: Deportation and Nation-Building in the Case of Tomo Cacic, 1931-1934.” *Canadian Historical Review* 91, 1 (March 2010), pp.61-86.


Reiter, Ester. “Secular Yiddisbkait: Left Politics, Culture, and Community.” Labour/Le Travail 49 (Spring 2002), 121-146.


**Unpublished Papers and Theses**


Niergarth, Kirk. “What a long way we have to go before we are grown up’: *Canadian Forum* and the Cultural Front.” Unpublished research paper, Memorial University, 2001.

Oliver, Bob “The Politics of the Pavement: Canadian Communism in the late 1920s and early 1930s.” unpublished research paper, Queen’s University, 2002.


**Internet Sources**

