

# Decentering the West in the History of Feminism: Reclaiming Russian Influence on US Feminism and Black Women Radicals in the Early 20th Century

Katharina Wiedlack

**ABSTRACT:** This article takes a fresh look on twentieth-century US feminist history for the international classroom and beyond. It focuses on the engagements of US feminists with Russian revolutionary thought and the pivotal role that early Russian feminists and the 1917 Russian Revolution played for both the US Women's Suffrage movement, and the emerging intersectional Black feminist thought.

**KEYWORDS:** Black feminism; Bolshevism; class; communism; intersectionality; gender; race; Russia; Women's Suffrage

*We realize that the liberation of all  
oppressed peoples necessitates the  
destruction of the political-economic systems  
of capitalism and imperialism as well as  
patriarchy. We are socialists because we  
believe that work must be organized for the  
collective benefit of those who do the work  
and create the products, and not for the  
profit of the bosses. Material resources must  
be equally distributed among those who  
create these resources.*  
"The Combahee River Collective Statement,"  
1978

## Introduction

In this brief overview, I will offer some thoughts on the necessity of shifting and expanding discourses on twentieth-century US feminist history for the international classroom and beyond. I will highlight the engagements of US feminists with Russian revolutionary thought

and suggest that early Russian feminists, and the feminist project of the 1917 Revolution and the early Soviet Union, played a pivotal role in both the Women's Suffrage movement, and later in the emergence of intersectional Black feminist thought and practice, in the US.<sup>1</sup>

My thinking is rooted in my personal experience of teaching feminist and LGBTIQ+ theory and history to international groups of students, including many students from diverse Russian-speaking contexts. Frequently within these classrooms, I heard students express the notion that feminism is a product of 'Western progress' as it emerged and thrived in the wake of US capitalist neoliberalism. Most of the students seemed to be unaware of US feminist engagement with Russian revolutionary thought during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, though they do know that there were US feminisms with socialist and Marxist leanings during the 1970s and 80s.

The significance of feminist theorists and activists such as Audre Lorde and bell hooks, and their struggle against anti-Black racism within US feminisms during the 1980s and 1990s, have received broad recognition in Russian-speaking and other international contexts. The Black Feminist Manifesto by the Combahee River Collective, as well as Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name - A Biomythography*, have now been translated into Russian. Nevertheless, my students, and arguably the broader international audience interested in feminist history, have little awareness of the engagement of earlier iterations of Marxist US feminisms with early Soviet modernization. They assume that early twentieth-century feminism was an exclusively white and middle-class movement, with its roots in capitalist individualism, and do not suspect any connection between Marxist internationalism and the feminist movement or the US whatsoever.

Although my students know that it is an oversimplification to view feminist and anti-feminist hegemonies along an East/West and South/North divide, they are still inclined to express it. This view is further endorsed by feminist groups and LGBTIQ+ advocates, who critique

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gender inequality and homophobia at home by comparing local contexts with what they see as relatively greater gender equality and LGBTIQ+ freedoms in the US. They tend to locate conservatism exclusively in the global East (Wiedlack et al. 26–27) and South (Currier 16) and perceive these geo-political spheres to be overridingly backward and anti-modern. Anti-feminist discourses within Russia and the Central Asian countries that were formerly part of the Soviet Union, in turn, reiterate the idea that feminism and LGBTIQ+ activism and theories are Western concepts, alien to them and incompatible with their local values (Edenborg 67–87, Mamedov 63–84, Kudaibergenova 363–80). The ascription of feminist theory and practice to the West, and to Western ideas about progress and world-making, leads many students to conclude that feminism emerged in a realm too distant from their own geographical locations and history to be relevant to them. The upshot of this long-held misconception is that, in their view, feminism cannot provide useful insights or have practical applications within their own non-Western contexts.

In this essay, I wish to suggest that examining the early influences of Soviet Russia and Soviet Central Asia on US feminism, and particularly on Black feminism, might enable us to reevaluate feminist history, by elaborating more solidarity-based, anti-racist, and decolonizing approaches. Focusing on the engagement of feminist and Black feminist history with Soviet feminisms, inside and outside of the classroom, also broadens the scope of global gender studies. While the impact of knowledge from the global South generated by thinkers and writers such as Boaventura de Sousa Santos or Gloria Anzaldúa, for example, is growing, knowledge from the global East is still negligible. As Jennifer Suchland points out, “[t]he lack of focus on the second world obscures the fact that it has always been a part of the global” (838).

Building on the works of Suchland, Madina Tlostanova, Raili Marling, and others, I view the Soviet cultural and geographical space not only as a location that gave rise to early feminist ideas, but also as “an epistemological location” (Marling 94) within which US feminists, and particularly Black feminists, found precedents for radical notions of socio-political equity and citizenship (sometimes without ever setting foot on Soviet soil).

It is difficult not to see a correlation between the lack of interest in the influence of the global East on the US history of feminist and queer epistemology, and what seems to be a dismissal of the communist and socialist dimensions of feminism. Those lineages of popular feminist thought that do not align with neoliberal capitalism, for example, the emphasis of the Combahee River Collective on the class struggle from a socialist perspective (“The Combahee River Collective Statement”) or Audre Lorde’s communist activism (*Sister Outsider; Zami*), are far from mainstream in feminist studies. Examining (and teaching) the historical engagement of US feminisms with Soviet feminisms might, however, promote and amplify existing developments within feminist and queer studies that critique the “privatized politics of representation, disconnected from systematic critique and materialist histories of colonialism, capitalism and heteropatriarchy” (Mohanty 972).

Within a historical perspective that focuses on the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, I view US feminism as an internationalist project, an assemblage of positions that emerged elsewhere and were imported by internationalists, travelers, immigrants, and exiles. By unearthing historic flows of knowledge and feminist knowledge-based solidarities, I aim at deconstructing western hegemonies and subverting polarized discourses. In my selective (and far from exhaustive) historical overview, I will concentrate, in particular, on some of the influences of Soviet women’s liberation discourses on early feminists during the struggle for women’s suffrage, as well as the impact of Soviet feminist and anti-racist discourses on Black feminist thought from the 1930s to the 1970s.

### **The Impact of the Bolshevik Revolution on US feminism**

According to American studies scholar Julia Mickenberg, who has done groundbreaking research on the history of US women engaged with Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century, the gender politics of the Russian revolutionaries were crucial for US women in forming their ideas about women’s citizenship rights (1023). Inspired by the revolutionary uprising of the first Russian Revolution of 1905 and the successful October Revolution in 1917, US feminists envisioned political goals far beyond the right to vote. These feminists aimed at “complet[ing] social revolution” (Cott 15), completing economic independence, “an

end to the double standard of sexual morality, [to] sexual stereotypes, and opportunity to shine in every civic and professional capacity” (Cott 15). They hoped that the Russian Revolution would provide the model for these aspirations. The revolutionary program offered American feminists a new vision and model of citizenship “that encompassed not simply political rights but also social rights, economic security, [and] a new kind of subjectivity that results from being citizens rather than subjects” (Mickenberg 1023).

In keeping with the goals and scope of socialist revolutionary thought, the women’s suffrage movement was, indeed, a transnational movement, with the aim of radically changing women’s social position and standing around the world. This contradicts the prevailing view of suffragists in many popular historical accounts, which depict them as conservative white women who voiced limited demands, ignoring or willfully thwarting the liberation struggles of African Americans and the rights of immigrants in order to further their own cause. While parts of the movement rightfully deserve this criticism, such a view equally ignores the voices in the women’s suffrage movement demanding radical social change.

Not all feminists who looked to Russia at the time unequivocally endorsed the Russian revolutionaries’ feminist program. Some suffragists, sensing a looming competition for democratic modernization, claimed that Russia was already outperforming the US. Ida B. Wells, for example, used this political strategy to embarrass the US, by highlighting the efforts of a “backward” country like Russia to achieve rights for women, while the purportedly more advanced US continued to treat African Americans in barbaric ways (Mickenberg 1028).

Other feminists, however, were genuinely enthralled by Russian revolutionary ideas. They were enamored with female Russian revolutionaries such as Vera Zasulich, who shot the St. Petersburg’s governor in 1877, or Sophia Perovskaya and Vera Figner, who planned the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881.

One of the most prominent of the women who were genuinely invested in Russia’s revolutionary path was Alice Stone Blackwell, a suffragist and abolitionist. Stone Blackwell

was instrumental in the effort to reunite the two largest suffrage organizations, the National Woman Suffrage Association, and the American Woman Suffrage Association, after their split in 1890 over disagreements about Black American voting rights. Additionally, Stone Blackwell inherited the editorship of the *National American Woman Suffrage Association's Woman's Journal* (later *Woman Citizen*) from her mother, Lucy Stone. She frequently published articles about Russian feminism in the journal.

Stone Blackwell further elaborated her ideas about Russia in a book titled *Songs of Russia*, published in 1906. She founded the Society of Friends of Russian Freedom (SAFRF), an organization of American and British supporters of the Russian Revolution, and befriended and supported Russian revolutionaries such as Ekaterina Breshko-Breshkovskaia, also known as Catherine Breshkovsky. When Breshkovsky toured the US throughout 1904–1905, Stone Blackwell, together with other prominent feminists, such as Lillian Wald, Jane Addams, and Emma Goldman, “set up Breshkovsky’s speaking engagements, translated her speeches, and publicized her tour” (Mickenberg 1029). Stone Blackwell published her correspondence with Breshkovsky, as well as some of Breshkovsky’s articles and speeches in the book *The Little Grandmother of the Russian Revolution: Reminiscences and Letters of Catherine Breshkovsky*.

When food riots, led by “angry” (Ruthchild 220), “hungry and wild women” (Alexander Krensky qtd. in Chatterjee, *Celebrating Women* 65), expanded into the February Revolution, which eventually dethroned Tsar Nicholas II on International Women’s Day in 1917, American suffragists and members of SAFRF rejoiced. Lillian Wald, Harriot Stanton Blatch, and Carrie Chapman Catt even sent an official letter “congratulating the revolutionaries on their achievements and expressing their ‘confidence in the Duma’ that the ‘supreme sacrifices of Russian heroines’ would be rewarded with women’s full political equality in the country’s ‘first great scheme of self-government and democracy,’ [and] concluded, ‘Heroes of Russia, trust your women’” (Mickenberg 1032).<sup>2</sup> Suffragist organizations, such as the International Woman Suffrage Alliance, the journals of the National Women’s Party (NWP) and the

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<sup>2</sup> Mickenberg discovered this undated document, which she traces back to April 1917, among the Lillian D. Wald Papers, folder 1.2, box 92, 1895–1936, at Columbia University Special Collections, New York, N.Y. (Mickenberg 1032, fn 27).

National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), enthusiastically spread the news, expressing their strong support for women suffrage and the women who counted among the ranks of the new leadership.

The Russian Revolution did, indeed, expedite change on US soil. The NAWSA had begun lobbying for women's suffrage in the US Congress by the end of 1916, and the Russian Revolution, together with the increasing involvement of the US in the First World War, inadvertently supported their cause. The Russian Revolution was brought up several times during hearings, which Congress had convened in the spring of 2017, to consider what later would become the Nineteenth Amendment to the US Constitution. Some speakers, citing Russian communism as a potentially dangerous ideological influence, warned that a denial of women suffrage might inspire a revolution in the US. Others simply stoked the sentiments of American national competitiveness. The question of Russia was also raised during the Senate hearings that followed, as well as in testimonies brought before the House of Representatives. Lucy Burns, co-founder of the NWP and editor of the *Suffragist*, for example, warned the House that "[t]he people of Russia have already risen against a government that was unworthy to call upon them to make these sacrifices and now the people of Russia are calling upon the people of the whole world to rise up against their Governments" (Burns qtd. in Mickenberg 1035).

While reports out of Russia, such as Mary Winsor's statement in an August edition of *The Suffragist* were prematurely confident, saying that "the Russians have given women the vote and given it freely without haggling or bargaining long before the regiment of women was formed" (Winsor 8), the fact that the first Provisional Russian government, and later the Bolsheviks, granted women's suffrage surely influenced the US government's final decision to do the same. The members of the NAWSA were never tired of comparing the US unfavorably to Russia, so that the US, at odds with European world leaders on this matter, was increasingly isolated. After massive protests led by the NAWSA, and continued pickets by the NWA, the state of New York approved women's suffrage on November 6, 1917. This was a

crucial win in the process eventually resulting in a federal amendment (Graham114; Ingalls Lewis 27).

On November 7, the Bolsheviks launched the October Revolution, seizing power from the Provisional Government. On November 10 in Washington D.C., more than 30 picketers, including prominent suffragists such as Lucy Burns, turned to the streets to protest the inhumane treatment of their fellow campaigners, most prominently Alice Paul, who had been detained or arrested earlier while protesting in the capital. This protest was brutally stamped out by police, and the protesters were jailed. The women's "'Night of Terror' in prison, with large-scale hunger strikes and forced feedings, did make headlines" (Ford 178), "becoming a public relations nightmare for the Wilson administration" (Mickenberg 1040), that could not be repaired by the sudden and unconditional release of the jailed women two weeks after their arrest. In a speech held at the December 1917 meeting of the NAWSA, and reprinted by *The Suffragist*, "the Russian poet and revolutionist Maria Moravsky, [expressed] shock that 'American women could be arrested for peaceful picketing at the White House'" (Mickenberg 1041). Comparing the treatment of the US women prisoners to her own incarceration during Czarist times, Moravsky allegedly said that the horrific experience in Russian prisons was nothing compared to what the US suffragists had had to endure.

Eventually, Wilson declared his support for women's suffrage. His declaration did not mention Russia explicitly, but it is likely that the frequent, and very vocal, comparisons of the US to Russia, by Catt and others, influenced his decision. While the NAWSA turned away from Russia after the Bolsheviks expanded their power throughout the country, the NWP continued publishing positive reports about Russia's strides towards gender equality. Although the women of the NAWSA had supported the socialist revolutionaries who formed the Russian Provisional Government, which had been overthrown, and were skeptical at best towards the Bolsheviks, their critique never really filtered into the public sphere. Moreover, the publication of Stone Blackwell's *The Little Grandmother of the Russian Revolution* in November 1917 engendered new interest in what was transpiring in Russia.



From the outset, feminists such as Anna Rochester, Grace Hutchins, Anna Louise Strong, and many others wholeheartedly believed in the Bolsheviks' program for women's equity. Lenin himself was a proponent of women's equality, and he envisioned female revolutionaries who were in no way less active and involved than their male comrades in every aspect of the revolution. "Lenin depicted a powerful vision of a socialist future, where women would be equal citizens and be expected to make important contributions to society" (Chatterjee, *Lady in Red* 273). His vision of the female revolutionary was influenced by the highly popular novel *Chto Delat? (What Is to Be Done?)*. Written by Nikolai Chernyshevsky and published in 1863, the book narrates the story of an oppressed woman, Vera Pavlovna—a symbol for Russia, and her liberation. It influenced generations of revolutionaries all over the world, not least Emma Goldman (Cassedy 27), who herself greatly shaped the American feminist movement of the early twentieth century.

Lenin's own ideas about women's role in the revolution were published in English under the title *On the Emancipation of Women* in 1934, a text the Comintern highly recommended to American Communists (Chatterjee, *Lady in Red* 273). His real-life models, and the role models for many American and other feminists, were the revolutionary leaders Nadezhda Krupskaya, Inessa Armand, Elena Stasova, and Alexandra Kollontai. Beginning in 1930, Russian tracts about female emancipation became available in English, and were generously distributed in the US. Among them were Anna Razumova's *Russian Women in the Building of Socialism*, George Serebrennikov's *The Position of Women in the USSR*, V. Sibiriak's *The Working Women in the Soviet Union*, and Krupskaya's *Soviet Woman: A Citizen with Equal Rights*.

Over the course of the 1920s, the Bolsheviks' rhetoric of female equity translated into laws that granted women easy access to divorce, legalized abortion, regulated paternity, the implementation of maternity policies and institutionalization child-care facilities, public laundries and dining halls, and the removal of barriers for women to education and professional careers (Engel 142–143). Members of the NWP, such as Mary Winsor, celebrated the Bolsheviks efforts, much to the chagrin of the growing number of anti-Communist

agitators who were already fomenting the public hysteria that would come to be known as the "Red Scare." Conservative and right-wing discourses firmly anchored the issue of women's suffrage to the Bolsheviks.

*The Woman Patriot* was one of the publications that railed against women's suffrage on these grounds. Catering to Southern racists and their anxieties, it alleged that black women could no longer be barred from voting, should the amendment pass, which would eventually lead to Black dominance in the South. When race riots broke out in July 1919, the paper blamed Bolshevik suffragists, claiming that they had incited social unrest with their public clamor for social equity. *The Woman Patriot* did not just attack women's suffrage, but feminism in general, trying to discredit it by linking it to Russian communism. "A September 1918 article, for instance, [...] claimed that 'woman suffrage Russia' was 'instituting female slave markets,' and asserted that 'Feminists and Socialists in Russia' had established 'Bureaus of Free Love' and had 'nationalized' women (and children)" (Mickenberg 1044).

While such claims were greatly exaggerated, the link to anti-racist aims and sexual liberation, however, did contain a degree of truth. The Bolsheviks had decriminalized sodomy in 1922, and acknowledged the existence of a broad range of views on non-normative sexuality. "[J]urists, doctors, and Marxist commentators expressed tolerance of some forms of 'homosexuality' and apprehension about others, [With] certain Russian medical experts and some 'homosexuals' interpret[ing] the rhetoric of the sexual revolution in an emancipationist fashion" (Healey 4). Despite this temporary gain for the cause of sexual liberation, however, male homosexuality was recriminalized under Stalin in 1933.

### **African American feminists and Soviet racial and gender emancipation**

The effect on American women and the LGBT community of the Bolshevik rhetoric on sexual revolution is hard to assess, given the absence of sources and the scanty research on the matter. The dominant historical narrative of the feminism of the 1920s views the first Red Scare that emerged in 1919, and the general ambivalence toward of the success of the Russian Revolution, as a radical turning away from everything connected to socialist or

communist social change, and, thus, a retreat from radical feminist social revolutionary ideas. But this narrative offers only a fragmented or partial picture of modern feminist history. A handful of feminist scholars, among them Choi Chatterjee and Shannon Smith, have challenged the view of liberal historians, who dismiss the connection between women suffragists and socialism as right-wing antifeminist propaganda of the time. These scholars claim that they were closely intertwined, disruptive of prevailing political narratives in the US—in short, ‘un-American’ (Cott 64; Nielsen 380–381; Mickenberg 1024), and show that there were, indeed, strong links between Russian socialism and US feminism in the 1920s, and beyond. The legacy of the Cold War, with its punitive policies and climate, however, has discouraged historians from acknowledging the interest and enthusiasm of many feminists for the Russian revolutionaries’ feminist program.

In recent years, scholars have paid increasing attention to the young Soviet Union’s vital role in the formation of Black internationalism.<sup>3</sup> Helen Holman, a suffragist drawn to the Workers’ Party, and, later, the Communist Party, was a Black activist who “became widely known in Harlem during the 1920s for speaking on street corners against Black women’s subjugation under capitalism and for praising Soviet family policies” (McDuffie 35). Like many of the feminists and anti-racism activists who were her contemporaries, Holman was drawn to the Soviet Union as a society that did not discriminate according to race or ethnicity, as it promoted itself.

Yet another influential Black activist and feminist with a strong interest and engagement with the young Soviet Union was Grace Campbell. Campbell was a popular figure in New York’s leftist circles, and significantly contributed to shaping the group of diasporic intellectuals who would become the African Blood Brotherhood (ABB), with its anti-racist, decolonial politics. Founded in 1919, the African Blood Brotherhood was the most important political

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<sup>3</sup> Among the most fascinating studies on the topic are Cedric Robinson’s seminal work *Black Marxism: The Making of a Black Radical Tradition*, Eric McDuffie’s *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism*, Kate A. Baldwin’s *Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain: Reading Encounters between Black and Red, 1922–1963*, Joy Gleason Carew’s *Blacks, Reds, and Russians: Sojourners in Search of the Soviet Promise*, Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore’s *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919–1950*, and Mark I. Solomon’s *The Cry Was Unity: Communists and African Americans, 1917–1936*.

organization among the many Black organizations in Harlem who were pursuing independent Black radical politics, and “Campbell was one of [its] ‘prime movers [...],’ a government informant accurately reported” (McDuffie 33). Beyond Harlem, it had members from a broad range of Black working-class communities in large cities such as Chicago or Tulsa. Importantly, the ABB was the “first black radical organization in the post-emancipation era US, [that] developed a radical conception of the relationship between race, class, nation, and socialist revolution” (Makalani, *For the Liberation of Black People Everywhere* 2). In contrast to the Socialist Party, the Brotherhood understood Black liberation and decolonization as central, not peripheral, in the global struggle against capitalist and imperialist oppression. Campbell believed that Communism would free Black women, and lobbied for it among her Harlem contemporaries (McDuffie 35, Makalani, *An Apparatus for Negro Women* 252). Moreover, like her fellow Black radical feminist comrades Williana Jones Burroughs and Hermina Dumont, Campbell not only believed in Communism, but had high hopes for the Soviet Union as beacon for Black women’s liberation worldwide.

Despite the fact that many women took part in the New York leftist movement, and a significant number of the ABB during the 1920s were Black women, as the ABB’s “director of consumer cooperatives” (McDuffie 37) and executive board member, Campbell was the only female member holding an official function. While the underrepresentation of Black women in leadership and official positions surely attests to heteronormative and sexist ideas about gender roles within the radical Left, it also speaks to the precarious position Black working-class women held in US society, making them more cautious when engaging in political work. Historian Eric McDuffie suggests that some women avoided public visibility so as not to attract too much attention by government informants. Campbell’s decision to work behind the scenes, rather than represent the ABB publicly, might have been her attempt to protect her occupation as a New York State parole officer in a women’s prison “from political scrutiny as a red scare swept across the nation [and g]overnment informants [...] documented her every move” (McDuffie 39). While it is not clear whether she understood the extent to which the government surveilled the ABB, and herself personally, she must at least have had a reasonable suspicion, given the scale of repressions against the Left, and

Black organizations, in particular. The systematic nature of its surveillance shows how seriously the US government took not only the impact of the Russian Revolution on the American Left, but also the empowering effect of communist ideas on female Black American radicals.

While radical Black women such as Campbell, Holman, Burroughs, and Dumont, as well as Elizabeth Hendrickson, did not step into the political limelight through holding official positions, they were nevertheless instrumental in shaping Harlem's political climate and political discourse through their frequent "stepladder" or "soap box" speeches (Harris 61).

### **Anti-Racism, Decolonization and Sexual Liberation**

Black women in the "Old Left" not only spread feminist class-consciousness, propagating racial and gender equality in the workplace, and promoting economic independence for Black women, on Harlem's street corners, but they also "rejected heteronormative, Victorian, middle-class morality by redefining sex inside and outside of marriage through the rejection of women's domesticity, [and] the advocacy of birth control" (McDuffie 42). The idea of the "New Soviet Woman," "an equal, a fighter and a comrade" (Wood 1), in the words of Alexandra Kollontai, as well as the sexual liberation associated with Communism, had an impact on early Black Leftist feminists and informed their unconventional gender and sexual politics. This influence was certainly notable within the social circles of the Harlem Renaissance, which was closely connected to Black feminist activists such as Campbell, who wrote for *The Crusader*. Campbell was close to Claude McKay (Holcomb 12), the queer writer and political activist, whose participation at the Fourth Communist International Congress in Moscow in 1922, and contribution to the resolution on the so-called "Negro Question," firmly connected the Harlem Renaissance to the new nation and its international institutions, and in turn firmly institutionalized anti-racism within its political discourses at that time.

Campbell's affiliation to *The Crusader* connected her not only to the Harlem Renaissance, but also to New York's white radicals, such as the future Communist Party leader Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. Flynn advocated for what Christine Stansell calls "sexual modernism" (225-72), a set

of discourses that brought forward social, moral, and sexual ideas and values that contradicted the rigid bourgeois respectability of American mainstream culture. New York's socialist and communist circles hosted many radical queer women, many of them self-declared feminists who promoted gender equity, birth control and sexual liberation.

While there are no records about Grace Campbell's or Helen Holman's sexual lives, their proximity to, and engagement with members of the Socialist Party, the early Communist Left, the International Workers of the World, the Harlem Renaissance, as well as the Woman's Suffrage Party, suggest that they did encounter lived forms of "sexual modernism." Not afraid of being associated with this modern sexuality, and consciously living economically independent and highly politicized lives, these early female Black radicals served as powerful role models for the next generation of Black women radicals, such as Louise Thompson, Eslanda Goode Robeson, or Shirley Graham Du Bois.

### **The Black Belt Thesis**

The Sixth Communist International Congress in Moscow in 1928 crucially influenced the relationship between many Black radicals and the Communist movement. There, the Comintern publicly promoted their anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist stance, including their solution to the "Negro Question": the Black Belt Thesis. The Black Belt Thesis identified African Americans as part of the colonized oppressed peoples of the world. According to the authors of the Black Belt Thesis, among them the American Communist Harry Haywood, as well as Siberian Communist Charles Nasanov, Americans of African descent were not just an ethnic or racial American minority. Rather, because "[t]he super-exploitation of Blacks in the Black Belt South was a dominant and enduring feature of US capitalism, [...] African Americans in fact constituted an internal colony" (Clark 377). This stance was further sharpened in a revised version, "adopted by the Comintern's Executive Committee on October 26, 1930," in which Black Americans "of the geographically distinct region in the South were characterized as an 'oppressed nation' with a 'Right of Self-Determination'" (Clark 377). The resolution further claimed governmental rights for Black Americans over the territory of the Black Belt, as well as to decide upon "the relations between their territory

and other nations, particularly the United States.” (“The 1930 Comintern Resolution on the Negro Question in the United States,” 1928 and 1930 Comintern Resolutions, 23 qtd. in Clark 378). Following the first resolution, until 1935, the call to self-determination for the Black Belt remained one of the Communist Party USA’s most urgent and visible slogans, especially within Black communist circles throughout the US.

The Black Belt Thesis prompted American Communists to fight racial inequality, including the abolition of white supremacy, lynching, and the Jim Crow laws. Additionally, it opened a discourse on the intersection of race and gender, since it explicitly discussed Black women, describing them as “constitut[ing] a powerful potential force in the struggle for Negro emancipation,” and identifying them as the “most exploited” population of the working class (“Resolution of the Communist International, October 26, 1928,” 62, qtd. in McDuffie 44). Although the Thesis did not further elaborate on the position or plight of female Black workers, Black women radicals took it as the opportunity and grounds for their claims to more agency and power within the Workers’ Party. Based on the Black Belt Thesis, Black women radicals successfully demanded and achieved institutional backing by the Communist Party for their various projects. Thereby, they did not only carve out their own space within the Communist Left, but also significantly contributed to building a mass movement in their Harlem neighborhood.

One of the most important projects of Black radical women was the Harlem Tenants League, which was established in 1928. Campbell, Hendrickson, Burroughs, and Hermina Dumont Huiswoud all played leading roles in it. Through the League, these women hampered evictions, organized rent strikes and demonstrations, and lobbied for just housing regulations and against segregation. Campbell and her mainly female comrades built their organization around their broad female social networks in Harlem. “[These] working-class Harlem women, not men, were the first to answer the Party’s call and to take part in Communist-led mass actions following the Black Belt thesis” (McDuffie 45). They understood the intersections between Black women’s exploitation in the labor market, unemployment, and gendered and racial discrimination. Though not the only such project, the League stood out among the



efforts run by churches, women's clubs, and other charitable institutions. These women understood their struggles as part of decolonial internationalism, "link[ing] poor housing to broader struggles against global white supremacy, capitalism, and imperialism" (McDuffie 45). Additionally, and in connection with housing issues, the Black women radicals of the League already focused on the struggles of domestic workers, locating them within the worldwide struggle against white supremacist capitalism and imperialism, and identifying unions as crucial structures for household workers' liberation. These Black women radicals lay the groundwork for one of the most important struggles that organizers such as Alice Childress or Claudia Jones would launch in the future: the unionization of Black women domestics.

### **Sojourns to the USSR and the Scottsboro Case**

The engagement with Communist Internationalism, and the Black Belt Thesis in particular, inspired and encouraged Black women to organize themselves. It also offered many of them the opportunity to write and publish about the oppression of Black women workers in communist-affiliated periodicals. Starting in the years of the Great Depression, Black women radicals such as Claudia Jones, Louise Thompson Patterson, Audley Moore, Thyra Edwards, Bonita Williams, Eslanda Goode Robeson, Shirley Graham Du Bois, Dumont Huiswoud, Fannie Lou Hamer, and many others, wrote and held speeches about the oppression of Black women workers, and "struggling against male supremacy in the Communist Party as well as in their families, their workplaces, and US society at large. [They] were the most radical feminists of the antifeminist 1950s, and [they had a significant] impact on the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s" (Weigand xii).

Many of this new generation of Black women radicals were part of the sexually transgressive social circle of the Harlem Renaissance. In contrast to the lives of their male comrades, such as Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, and Wallace Thurman, not much is known about the sexual lives of the female members of the Harlem Renaissance. The writings and other legacies of people such as Dorothy West, Huiswoud, and others, however, bear witness to



the fact that they did not live the heteronormative lives that US society expected them to live.<sup>4</sup>

Through their ways of living and their writing, these Black radicals reinterpreted the Black Belt Thesis, redefining the position of female Black workers in the struggle for racial equality. The infamous case of the Scottsboro Boys was a significant factor in the radicalization of many of them, especially Thompson. Nine Black teenagers (aged 12 to 19) from the area around Scottsboro, Alabama, were falsely accused of raping two white women on a freight train in 1931. The glaring racism of the accusation and the subsequent legal case set off a movement that not only showed solidarity with the young men, but challenged the racism of the entire legal justice system in the US South, demanding the right to a fair trial for all Black Americans. The case became a *cause célèbre* and watershed moment for anti-racist activism and solidarity far beyond the US borders, and was taken up especially by the Soviet Union, with Soviet discourses outspokenly favoring the accused, and condemning US racial injustice.

The solidarity of the USSR with the Scottsboro boys predisposed American Black radicals, including Thompson and Edwards, favorably towards the country; but this was not the only factor in their enthusiasm. Many Black women of the younger generation traveled to the Soviet Union and Soviet Central Asia to experience Soviet modernization firsthand. Thompson, for example, traveled to the Soviet Union and Soviet Central Asia in 1932–1933 (Wiedlack, *A Feminist Becoming* 104). Initially, Thompson was interested in Soviet industrialization and workers' liberation, and the decolonization of "brown and black" (Thompson, *On Her 1932 Visit*) peoples in Soviet Central Asia. While Thompson was not particularly vocal on the topic of women's liberation before her trip, what she experienced in the Soviet Union and in Soviet Central Asia convinced her that only a focus on Black women's liberation could lead to the liberation of all Black people in the US and beyond. Upon

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<sup>4</sup> For a detailed analysis of Dorothy West's sexual politics see the article "A Feminist Becoming? Louise Thompson Patterson's and Dorothy West's Sojourn in the Soviet Union." *Feminismo/S* 36 (2020): 103–128. For information on Huiswood, see Shchurko, Tatsiana. "Haunting Encounters: Reimagining Hermina Dumont Huiswood's Trip to the Soviet Union, 1930–33," *Red Migrations: Marxism and Transnational Mobility after 1917*, edited by Bradley Gorski and Philip Gleissner, Forthcoming.

returning from the USSR, Thompson began to focus on the “three-fold exploitation” (Gilyard 119) of Black women: as women, as workers, and as Black Americans. She campaigned for the unionization of domestic workers, for the housewives’ league and, in 1936, initiated the formation of a women’s group at the National Negro Congress (Gilyard 119; Wiedlack, *A Feminist Becoming* 122). At the same time, Thompson began publishing her feminist visions for the improvement of female Black workers’ socio-economic situation, for example, in *Woman Today*. In *Woman Today*, Thompson criticizes not only the fact that Black women are disadvantaged within the sphere of labor, but also that they bear the burden of reproductive work alone (Thompson, *Toward a Brighter* 14). With Augusta Savage, Thompson founded a political forum called the “Vanguard Club” (Gilyard 98). This was a subgroup of the National Negro Congress, and though it proved to be short-lived, she continued her struggle for gender equality and women’s emancipation during the era of European Fascism. In 1951, together with Shirley Graham Du Bois, Charlotta Bass, Goode Robeson, and others, she founded “Sojourners for Truth and Justice,” a highly influential feminist civil rights organization. Focusing simultaneously on women’s rights, domestic civil rights, and global human rights, their aim was to “carry forward the tradition of Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth and [to] give inspiration and courage to women the world over, especially the colored women of Africa and Asia who expect us to make this challenge” (Louise Thompson Patterson and Beah Richards “A Call to Negro Women” [1951], qtd. in Gilyard 171).

While Thompson was only one of many African-American feminist radicals of her time, she is exemplary in revealing the influence and breadth of Soviet feminism among Black radicals in the US. Together with her friend and frequent collaborator Goode Robeson, they organized mass rallies as “the Committee of One Hundred Women” (Gilyard 178), in solidarity with her husband, civil rights lawyer and Communist Party leader William Patterson, who was persecuted under McCarthyism.

One of her most significant contributions to the future of Black feminism, and “her most significant street action” (Gilyard 196), was Thompson Patterson’s activism on behalf of Angela Davis, who was being held at a New York jail, waiting to be extradited to California, in

December 1970. At sixty-nine years old, Thompson Patterson spearheaded “the New York Committee to Free Angela Davis” (Gilyard 197), which, among other events, organized a large demonstration on Greenwich Avenue outside of the Women’s House of Detention in New York City’s Greenwich Village, where Davis was confined. Davis, the prominent Black Panther Party and CPUS member, prison abolitionist, and Black feminist, was accused of conspiracy to commit murder, among other capital felonies, when a gun registered to her name was used in a revolt at the Marin County courthouse, and four people were killed. Despite the flimsy case of the prosecution, Davis was held in jail for more than a year before being released on bail in February 1972, and eventually acquitted of all charges. Thompson Patterson spoke publicly on behalf of Angela Davis, wrote in US and global communist-supported papers, and led marches in the US and overseas, “criticizing the treatment of Davis and demanding her release” (Gilyard 196).

While Thompson Patterson fought for Davis within the anti-Communist West, Communist countries all over the world, most notably the Soviet Union and Eastern Germany, organized on her behalf during the time that Davis was on the FBI’s most wanted list, and later in prison. After her release, she toured many of those countries, receiving prestigious Communist honors and prizes—a fact that is held against her, even today (Young). Although Davis never explicitly explained the ways in which she was influenced by Soviet politics, she has mentioned that the solidarity shown by communist countries was very important to her while she was in prison. Furthermore, in a recent interview, she implied that this solidarity inspired her to continue her prison-abolition work through the foundation of “the National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression[, which] exists in some form to this day” (Davis qtd. in de Guzman).

### **Conclusion: Against Nostalgia, for a Critical Acknowledgment**

As many scholars working on the implementation of Soviet feminism have shown, the Soviets were far from realizing the goal of true equality between the sexes (Ashwin and Isupova 446; Holmgren 536). After 1930, with the abandonment of the “Zhenotdel” (women’s department) and the active silencing of Bolshevik feminists, Soviet policy reverted

on many fronts to heteronormative and patriarchal gender roles and heteronormative ideas about sexuality, re-criminalizing sex work and homosexuality, as well as limiting the right and access to abortion.

Yet, until that reversal, the Soviet Union, and Soviet Central Asia, provided many American feminists—from suffragists and early feminists such as Alice Stone Blackwell and Lillian Wald, to feminist journalists such as Louise Bryant and Bessie Beatty—with discourses on, and the courage to fight for and implement women's equality. The Soviet example gave them a foundation for realizing feminist platforms and actions within the United States and beyond, and inspired generations of feminists to come. It is possible that without the evidence from early Soviet feminism that equality could be realized at a national level, women's suffrage might have been delayed for decades. Likewise, if they had not thrown down the gauntlet and challenged the US majority in its race for progress in an already looming Cold War, women's suffrage might not have been achieved.

Equally important, Soviet support for decolonization world-wide, and Black liberation in the USA, was immensely appealing to female Black Americans. The experience of personal freedom as Black women during visits to the Soviet Union, and the acknowledgment they found there of Black women's work and activism, without racist or sexist reservations, allowed many of them to develop their ideas on the intersection of race, class and gender. Their experience of freedom from racism, and to some extent sexism, during their visits, and the solidarity and support they were shown, inclined women such as Eslanda Good Robeson, Louise Thompson Patterson, Thyra Edwards and others, to hold fast to the Soviet promise of total equality. Although they no doubt wrestled with the knowledge of Soviet atrocities against Jewish people, criticism of the new state, and the political opposition, most of them chose to downplay this knowledge; the importance of the Soviet Union as an ally in their struggle was too great to sacrifice. In addition, intense anti-Communist and anti-Soviet propaganda in the US not only compromised its own credibility, but also cast doubt on what to believe at all, creating an imperative to take sides unequivocally.

In any case, and most importantly, through their engagement with Soviet feminists and anti-racist thinkers in the Soviet Union and Soviet Central Asia, Black American women found “a space to rethink crucial aspects of social and cultural life at home” (Baldwin 448), and the courage to raise their voices as feminist anti-racist activists in the national and global arena. Acknowledging the socialist or Marxist heritage of contemporary US feminism, which was inspired not only by feminist thinkers from the so-called “second world,” but was also raised up and championed by Black American feminists, can help to dismantle the ongoing erasure of Black feminists and radical revolutionary thought from feminist genealogies and histories. Such an acknowledgment additionally deconstructs the notion that feminism is a primarily Western concept, alien to Eastern cultures and values. Viewing the history of the twentieth-century feminist movement from the position and commitments of early Black women radicals, who were profoundly engaged in transnational women’s liberation discourses on the intersections of race, class, and sexuality, is crucial to an understanding of feminism today, and to our aims going forward.

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