

**ANYTHING THAT BURNS YOU: THE SOCIAL POETRY  
OF LOLA RIDGE, GENEVIEVE TAGGARD,  
AND MARGARET WALKER**

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*ABSTRACT*

This essay explores the work of three neglected American women poets as well as suggests the importance of women's social poetry as a neglected genre within modern American literary studies. It examines the continuum of a radical literary practice in the United States from the first through the second world wars as produced by the representative examples of Lola Ridge (1873-1941), Genevieve Taggard (1894-1948), and Margaret Walker (1915-) whilst also maintaining how the social concerns expressed in these poets' work can tell us much about national and international history as they witnessed it.

Let anything that burns you come out whether  
it be propaganda or not...I write about something  
that I feel intensely. How can you help writing  
about something you feel intensely?

(Lola Ridge in an interview, 1920s)<sup>1</sup>

What's in the men nowadays —the *women* have  
the fire & the ardency & the power & the depth.

(Genevieve Taggard in a letter to  
Josephine Herbst, early 1920s)<sup>2</sup>

As the Twentieth Century closes out, it may appear odd to epigrammatically draw upon the angry passions that two obscure names express as they vent their attitudes about literary practice in the 1920s. Yet it is the angry passion of a now rather forgotten group of American women poets that allows us to remember the social and politi-

cal crises of an early part of the century, which the literary historical practices of the latter half of the century have, until very recently, deliberately worked to bury. To have a full understanding of this century as we bid it farewell, we must consider these forgotten and undervalued voices who bore witness to the insurmountable rage, complexity, and horror that accompanied them as they lived, wrote, and worked for change.

The angry passions, as it were, of American women poets writing from the first through the second world wars require their own special category within modern American poetry. A number of poets wrote socially engaged or “political poetry” during the 1930s, an era that produced much “political” art. However, American poets were composing radical verse well before and after the Great Depression gave a multitude of artists radical food for thought. Yet most histories of modern American poetry (including those on women poets) have neglected to inform their readers of an aesthetic practice I refer to as “social poetry.” As post-war criticism, particularly the New Critics with their anti-historical, anti-sociological bent, was successful in rooting out artistic projects that reminded their audience of urgent social meanings, so was that critical attitude successful in silencing women —especially those whose “depth,” “power,” and “ardency” went into constructing a socially conscious aesthetic.<sup>3</sup>

Some of the socially engaged poetry that found its way into print during the early decades of this century was rediscovered in the 1960s and 1970s by literary historians influenced by the New Left and the women’s and third world liberation movements.<sup>4</sup> It served to remind contemporary readers that the radical lyrics they were encountering within their own movements indeed had precursors. As some of the influence of these revisionist histories and anthologies have waned, the radical lyrics of women poets have been reburied.<sup>5</sup> In this article I hope to show that not only is women’s social poetry an important component within the history of Twentieth-Century American poetry, but also that such writing leaves us with valuable historical records as we move into the Twenty-First Century. Although the worlds represented in the political poetries of American women poets of the first half of the Twentieth Century are hardly recognizable today, the social injustices —the class, race, and gender oppression— investigated therein, have not disappeared.

The socially conscious verse of radical, feminist women poets and the contributions they made towards a multi-valent poetry of the left is one of many competing poetry projects of the modern period (1910-1945). It is also what Louise Bernikow identified over twenty years ago as “the buried history within the buried history” (45).<sup>6</sup> Women poets created socially engaged verse in a variety of forms and venues. None has been thoroughly assessed with the kind of attention and complication the genre deserves: Familiar and unfamiliar names such as Sarah Cleghorn, journalist Anna Louise Strong, Martha Millet, Agnes Ernst Meyer, Laura Benet, Angelina Weld Grimke, Helen Hoyt, love poet Edna Millay, Lucia Trent, the important, long career of Muriel Rukeyser,<sup>7</sup> Joy Davidman, the fiction writers Kay Boyle and Tillie Olsen, those accepted by the high-modernist camp —Mina Loy, H.D. and Lorinne Niedecker— Viola C. White, the young Eve Merriam and Gwendolyn Brooks, Ruth Lechlitner, Maria de la Vega Welch, Kathleen Tankersly Young, worker and labor martyr Ella May Wiggins, and three poets about whom I will say much more, Lola Ridge, (1873-1941) Genevieve Taggard, (1894-1948), and Margaret Walker (1915-) all at one time or another produced poems of protest.

Since I do not have the space to do a more detailed investigation of American women's literary production on behalf of social causes, I look at Ridge, Taggard, and Walker, and their special relationship to poetry as social/political praxis. Their work helps to explain, and forms a foundation for, women's social poetry as a literary genre. These poets may not have necessarily put their own bodies onto lines of protest, yet they did put their radical selves into lines of poetry. Lola Ridge, a Dublin born immigrant and Irish patriot wrote after the 1916 Easter Uprising: "They are fighting to-night in Sackville Street / and I am not there" ("Tidings" 101). She would make up for this absence by infusing her Imagist poetry with chants for and about working class and immigrant America:

*Allons enfants de la patrie —*  
 Electric...piercing...shrill as a fife  
 the voice of a little Russian  
 breaks out of the shivered circle.  
 Another voice rises...another and another  
 leaps like flame to flame.  
 ("In Harness" 84)

Genevieve Taggard, already celebrated as a New Woman poet on the fringes of Greenwich Village bohemia, found that the Great Depression required a rather different voice for women. In "At Last the Women Are Moving," written in the mid-thirties, she observes the importance of women's social activism:

Last, walking with stiff legs as if they carried bundles.  
 Came mothers, housewives, old women who knew why they abhorred war.  
 Their clothes bunched about them, they hobbled with anxious steps.  
 To keep with the stride of the marchers, erect, bearing wide banners (57).

Margaret Walker, just twenty-two years old and a transplanted southerner working on the Chicago W.P.A., faithfully documented her African-American heritage. Its challenges, regrets, triumphs, and failures were source material for her artistic expression:

For my people thronging 47th Street in Chicago and Lenox  
 Avenue in New York and Rampart Street in New  
 Orleans, lost disinherited dispossessed and happy  
 people filling the cabarets and taverns and other  
 people's pockets needing bread and shoes and milk and  
 land and money and something —something all our own.  
 ("For My People" 7)

Ridge's, Taggard's, and Walker's poetry joins the ongoing discussion of American Modernism's contested terrain and responds to Cary Nelson's contention that the canon of modern American poetry tells only one side of a more complex literary history of the poetries of the period. Nelson's *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910-1945*, published in 1989,

created a landmark theoretical base on which to dialogue about the genre from a class perspective. While Nelson's own attention to gender remains underdeveloped, his revisionist approach to literary history is essential to any rearticulation of the cultural and political significance of American women's social poetry. Nelson maintains that literary history ignores diversity when it cannot be conveniently placed into a "coherent historical sequence" (7), and further argues that "[t]he full range of modern poetries is so great that it cannot be persuasively narrativized in any unitary way" (7). Literary history is detached from history in its broad construction—both in terms of national history and the "history of everyday life" (7). With such revisionary practice put in place, the neglected social poetry of American women takes up its residence inside Modernism's conventionally exclusive marble halls. The "history of everyday life" told in their poems takes modernist practice beyond its concerns with the inner life and the fragmented self and connects it to "everyday life in the modern world," which includes the social and political crises to which women poets like Ridge, Taggard, and Walker responded.

My interest in Lola Ridge, Genevieve Taggard, and Margaret Walker as they form part of a counter-tradition in modern American poetry is centrally concerned with their desire to represent working-class life. Ridge, Taggard, and Walker crossed class lines, lived on the margins as writers, as radicals, as women. Margaret Walker lived on the margins as a black, female academic.<sup>8</sup> Lola Ridge, born in Ireland and raised in Australia, was a foreigner, an anarchist; speaking with an accent, she must have stood out conspicuously. Genevieve Taggard was a communist, and she did not stop being a communist after the Hitler-Stalin pact, or after V-J Day. Enough said. All three wrote sonnets, a form disparaged by modernist critics. Not only did they pique certain modernist sensibilities by writing sonnets, but instead of continuing with this tradition as it was employed by Shakespeare, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Edna St. Vincent Millay, these poets followed the pattern set by Shelley in radical sonnets such as "England in 1819" and "To the Republic of Benevento." Ridge's sonnet "Electrocution" critiques the death penalty through a graphic description of death in the electric chair. Taggard's "Silence in Majorca" honors the Spanish people in their fight against Franco, and Walker's "Whores" examines the traffic in working-class black women. Each poet wrote about race. Ridge wrote about race riots and even identified immigrant Jews as racialized others. Taggard's early poetry and fiction pays homage to multi-racial working-class Hawaii; her later poems honor the cultural products of Harlem. Walker races working-class life and classes black aesthetics.

Much work has been done on the categories of race and gender, but little attention has been paid to class or towards understanding the necessary trajectory of race, class and gender. Most poetry studies that explore female subjectivity as part of poetic practice ignore the social category of class, which interested Ridge, Taggard, and Walker immensely.<sup>9</sup> Their own representations of female subjectivity are inextricably tied to their class concerns. In her ground-breaking study *Sex, Class, and Culture* (1978), Lillian Robinson observed that "the most massive and brutal attempts to deny the existence of an analytic category occur with respect to class" (66). Ridge, Taggard, and Walker were not working-class writers in the traditional sense (all three were educated and "groomed" for a life beyond employment in other people's kitchens,

factories, and office buildings). Yet they identified with, lived among, protested alongside, and dreamed their creative acts through disenfranchised, working-class America.

Two generations pass from Lola Ridge to Margaret Walker. The lives of all three poets converge in the 1930s, the most important decade for socially engaged verse in the West. As Cary Nelson has commented about American poetry in the 1930s: “For a brief moment in American literary history, writing poetry became a credible form of revolutionary action. Reading poetry, in turn, became a way of positioning one’s self in relation to the possibility of basic social change” (“Poetry Chorus” 32). Ridge, in her sixties, was finishing off a career filled with strong political passions and chronic ill health. Genevieve Taggard was in “mid-career,” to use a term designated by arts funders, in her forties and already possessed of a reputation. Walker had just begun her career by the mid thirties, having published her important poem “For My People” in *Poetry Magazine* while still in her early twenties. All three poets signed the 1936 “call” for the formation of the League of American Writers. The organization was founded as a support for the Communist Party’s Popular Front agenda, though many non-party members were active in the league. The fact that these three women each come from different generations that converge in the 1930s is rather important. Most critical work done on radical culture centers on the 1930s. It is arguably the most important decade for left wing poets and left art in general, yet as Paula Rabinowitz has demonstrated “women have remained invisible in standard accounts of the [period], particularly [in] those written by literary radicals both then and now” (*Labor and Desire* 3).

To complicate the claim that the 1930s is the representative decade for socially engaged writing, Lola Ridge’s work began to appear in the Tens; her most prolific period was the 1920s. Genevieve Taggard became known as a literary radical when she edited *Poetry from the Masses* in 1925. Taggard’s most outspoken decade was the Thirties, but she continued to write important class conscious, anti-fascist poetry up until her death in 1948. Margaret Walker comes of age as a poet during the 1930s, and publishes her first book in the early Forties. Yet Walker, now an octogenarian, and as far as I know still writing, did not publish a second book of poems until the 1960s, a decade also known for its radical art and culture. Walker in fact creates a bridge from the “Old Left” to the “New Left,” and her radical black consciousness is recreated in the 1960s as a new audience and a new African American aesthetic began to appear. All three poets explore, expand, retain, and reinvent modernism’s radical terrain. All three poets use the idea of a nation and world in need of transformation as a starting point for their aesthetic practice. All three poets produced poetry within a given political context. To me this “context”—the social and political committedness found in their poetry—is what seals together their different lives, generations, and poetics. All three poets write about and create a poetic discourse out of the intersections of class, race, and gender. Yet inasmuch as these poets write gender and articulate feminist concerns, women are not their central focus. All three poets believed that social change was impossible without the communal efforts of both sexes.

Looking at each poet separately we are able to see an important continuum for women’s social poetry of the modern period. We are also able to learn something about American social history as we consider the chronological movement of these artists’ works. Lola Ridge’s poetry began to appear in literary journals in the mid-tens. She had worked for the anarchist Ferrer Association, and had contributed poems

and articles to Emma Goldman's and Alexander Berkman's journal *Mother Earth*. In the poem "Reveille"<sup>10</sup> she urges workers to strike against dehumanizing labor practices and the equally exploitative war industry that would make "a conscript of the workman's son" ("Via Ignis" 45):

Come forth, you workers!  
Let the fires go cold —

Let the iron spill out, out of the troughs —  
Let the iron run wild  
Like a red bramble on the floors —  
Leave the mill and the foundry and the mine  
And the shrapnel lying on the wharves —  
Leave the desk and the shuttle and the loom —  
Come,  
With your ashen lives,  
Your lives like dust in your hands (86).

Ridge creates an alternative to "make it new," the apolitical chant of the Pound generation, by taking the rhythms of modern poetry and transforming them into a call to arms for American workers. "Frank Little at Calvary," about a murdered labor organizer and "the frail barricade" that was "his life," and "Lullaby," with its postscript "(An incident of the East St. Louis Race Riots, when some white women flung a living colored baby into the heart of a blazing fire)," were inspired by the bloody summer of 1917 when class war and race war mingled on the home front as America entered the war in Europe. "Lullaby," in particular, which is constructed as a nursery rhyme the white women tell the black child as they prepare to toss into a burning house, complicates Ridge's celebration of labor. While it explores the war-time divisions between white and non-white workers, it focuses on the senseless acts of brutality committed by white working class women against their African-American neighbors.

Nineteen-twenties' America, embedded in post-war conservatism, economic boom and conspicuous consumption, found Ridge continuing her artistic campaign in defence of the worker. Her 1923 poem "Morning Ride" reminds commuting New Yorkers, via a newspaper headline, about the lynching of a Jewish man, Leo Frank, in the South ten years earlier. Situating her poem on one of the once popular New York City open-air buses, she asks:

did he too feel it on his forehead,  
the gentle raillery of the wind,  
as the rope pulled taut over the tree  
in the cool dawn? (67).

During the Twenties Ridge was also active in the campaign to free the Italian anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti, who were accused of robbery and murder outside of Boston in 1920. Ridge, along with tens of thousands of people the world over, refused to see the two immigrants as criminals but as innocent working men with

...hands cognizant  
 Of the cool feel of fish and of the grains of leathers,  
 Hands made stiff  
 In such plain service as men live by, yet despise the servers.  
 (“Two in the Death House” 36)<sup>11</sup>

This scapegoating of immigrant radicals during a time of increased anti-immigrant sentiment and xenophobia in the United States became a cause celebre. (Open immigration, which began in the 1880s, and of which Ridge herself took advantage, had legally come to an end in 1924). While the whole world watched, Sacco and Vanzetti were executed at midnight on August 23, 1927. Ridge was arrested after she crossed a police line, where she was promptly knocked to the ground by a horse being used in riot control. She would mention her encounter with the police horse in the long poem “Three Men Die,” which appeared in her last book *Dance of Fire*.

Drumbeats of the hooves...so close, so close...that one who had been there (and for some quite  
 Unbalanced reason did not run...but stood there in the hooves’ path) had noted  
 (Knowing horses) the lead head, straight nose, clean flank,  
 Line of the onrushing shoulder, brought to this...and feeling the wet foam on  
 his mouth, glimpsed spread nostrils and the white  
 Fire of the eye, rolling as in agony...(75-76).

Yet like “Two in the Death House,” “Three Men Die” places its energies on the heroic ordinariness of the two Italian working men. Ridge’s and countless other protester’s acts of resistance are, for her, but footnotes to the memory she must construct of (in Vanzetti’s words) “a good shoemaker and a poor fish-peddler.” Also written “plain, with Sacco and the fish / monger” (235) was Tom Mooney. Ridge’s poem “Stone Face,” published in *the Nation* in 1932, became part of the defence campaign to free the labor leader who spent 23 years in jail. Mooney was falsely convicted of planting a bomb that killed ten people at a San Francisco parade in 1916. A poster bearing Mooney’s worn-out “clenched face” on one side and Ridge’s poem on the other was plastered across America to advertise Mooney’s cause.

While Ridge’s critics and some contemporaries characterized her work as “masculine,”<sup>12</sup> women and women’s labor are also important features in her poetry. Her brilliant, sorely neglected long poem, “The Ghetto,” probably the first poem about ghetto life published in America, looks at the labors and desires of immigrant Jewish women. While she celebrates foundry workers in “Reveille” and “Song of Iron,” “The Ghetto” profiles the immigrant, Jewish “New Woman” and examines women’s sweat shop labor:

Sadie dresses in black.  
 She has black-wet hair full of cold lights  
 And a fine-drawn face, too white.  
 All day the power machines  
 Drone in her ears...  
 All day the fine dust flies

Till throats are parched and itch  
 And the heat —like a kept corpse—  
 Fouls to the last corner (6).

Lola Ridge had herself spent time laboring in factories. In 1929 she was diagnosed with tuberculosis. She died in 1941, leaving only five books of poems. Genevieve Taggard, on the other hand, was immensely prolific. She wrote or edited 18 books. Although half of Taggard's literary output was produced in the 1920s —and in 1930 she published a biography of Emily Dickinson—the dark times of the 1930s inspired her most overtly socially conscious lyrics. Between economic catastrophe, the rise of fascism in Europe, and the international Popular Front, poetry, for Taggard, became a collective chant, a *mass song* “with one refrain: / OUR HOPE’S NOT VAIN” (63). Taggard rejected the quiet lyricism of modern poetry’s individualist introspection and transformed it into the lively social music that would unite voices. As she maintains in “Definition of Song:”

Singing is the work of many voices.  
 Only so when choral mass rejoices  
 Is the lock sprung on human isolation  
 And all the many welded into one (7).

She also hoped to unite voice with body in order to create an active social body in which the people themselves take control through their creative, but collective endeavors:

Body sings best when feet beat out the time.  
 Translated song, order of bold rhyme, —  
 Swing the great stanza on the pavement, —use  
 The public street for publishing good news (7).

Taggard's interest in the body's creative social movement is also found in “Four Frescoes of the Future,” which suggests the revolutionary utopian moment of “multitude and no tumult: a maze on march” (64). The poem seems inspired by social realist art as it depicts the strong bodies of men and women collectively taking power. Taggard was an uncritical supporter of the Soviet Union in the Thirties and Forties, and one might read in poems like “Four Frescoes of the Future” and “Definition of Song” the Popular Front imagery connected with the largely Soviet dictated agenda of the American Communist Party, although Taggard was not a party member. Her belief in artistic militancy for these times of crisis also appears in the poem “Life of the Mind, 1934,” in which she writes in an epigram: “The words in the books are not true / If they never act in you” (56). Written at the height of the Depression, the poem calls for a unity of “the mind’s link with the arm,” as she urges writers and readers to consider the power of poetry to link thought and action. The active body of the writer makes her words act as well: “Now action like a sword. / Now to redeem the word” (57).

Taggard's Depression era militancy was also fueled by the rise of fascism in Europe and the civil war in Spain. The plight of the Spanish people against Franco's fascist insurgency had special meaning for Taggard; she had lived on the island of



Majorca in 1931 while on a Guggenheim Fellowship. Her work of the late Thirties and early Forties is in fact altered by the struggle against fascism. The celebratory urgings of collective solidarity found in the work she produced at the height of the Depression are succeeded by poems, such as those written to members of the International Brigades, which praise lost struggles. Poems like "Image," written in honor of English poet and critic Christopher Caudwell who was killed fighting on the republican side in 1937, as well as "To the Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade," honor the unsung bravery of the untrained soldiers, male and female, white and black, who defended Spanish democracy while the world powers sat aside:

Say of them  
 They knew no Spanish  
 At first, and nothing of the arts of war  
 At first,  
     how to shoot, how to attack, how to retreat  
 How to kill, how to meet killing  
 At first...

Say of them they were young, there was much they did not  
 know,  
 They were human. Say it all; it is true. Now say  
 When the eminent, the great, the easy, the old,  
 And the men on the make  
 Were busy bickering and selling,  
 Betraying, conniving, transacting, splitting hairs,  
 Writing bad articles, signing bad papers,  
 Passing bad bills,  
 Bribing, blackmailing,  
 Whimpering, meaching, garrotting, —they  
 Knew and acted  
     understood and died ("To the Veterans..." 39)

Her poems "Autumn Song for Anti-Fascists" and "Silence in Majorca" speak of both resistance and powerlessness, while "Andalucia" written four years after the fall of Madrid, urges memory in the presence of dim realities: "Andalucia, where our dead comrades are young bones, / The color of old rock mountains, bone yellow and white" (45).

Like Lola Ridge, Genevieve Taggard wrote poetry conventionally identified with the masculine cultures of war and labor unrest, yet women were continually present within these cultures and Taggard put them on the front lines in "At Last the Women Are Moving," or questioned their passivity in "Middle-Aged, Middle-Class Woman at Midnight." In an early poem "Everyday Alchemy," which Taggard republished in the Depression era collection *Calling Western Union*, she gives voice to the needs of poor women who make "a solace for poor bosom-bended heads" (23). In "Feeding the Children," from the same collection, she remarks how women "are conservative" until "the lack of milk" leads them to ask "how shall we feed the children?" and then to demand, "Vote the strike!" (54-55). Also like Lola Ridge, Genevieve Taggard believed that social

struggle was something that men and women must participate in together; social transformation was impossible without the collective efforts of both sexes.

Genevieve Taggard died in November of 1948. Her last years were spent in ill health, finding it difficult to publish her radical lyrics in the increasingly paranoid climate of post-war America. Margaret Walker closes the Depression and enters the years of World War Two with her first book *For My People*, which was published in the Yale Younger Poets Series in 1942. Most of Walker's early poetry pays homage to the black south, yet it is also a product of the Great Migration. Two million blacks came north in the early decades of the century. They would find wages and opportunities unimaginable in their southern homelands, but they would not find racism eradicated. Walker's early talents were nurtured in Chicago's black and white radical literary circles. After she finished her studies at Northwestern University she worked in Chicago before returning to the South for good. She published poems and stories in *New Anvil* and the black radical journal, *Challenge*. It is difficult to know whether it was the Migration alone that led her to insist in "For My People" that "a new world be born," and "a second generation full of courage issue forth," but the opportunities, disappointments, and changes that the Migration brought allowed her to observe first hand a new cultural formation:

For my people standing staring trying to fashion a better way  
from confusion, from hypocrisy and misunderstanding,  
trying to fashion a world that will hold all the people,  
all the faces, all the adams and eves and their countless  
generations (7).

Henry Louis Gates, Jr, writing about the Migration, summarily characterizes the new world fashioning of Black America that Walker had witnessed first hand: "Just as slavery inadvertently created a new "African" culture—a New World Western, Pan-African culture and ethnicity— so, too, did the Great Migration create a new culture, one northern and urban yet thoroughly southern in its roots" (17).

In *For My People*, a book made up of modernist meditations, verse folk tales, and sonnets, Walker emphasizes African American labor: she creates a poetic sequence out of the forced toil that created its own cultural narratives. Walker's interest in the essential Marxist concept of how the condition of being determines the ways in which men and women learn to think about themselves and their social circumstances is found throughout this collection. "Since 1619," a poem of many questions beginning with "[h]ow many years since 1619 have I been singing Spirituals?" reflects upon Black America's hundreds of years of servitude, and the built-up anger that must accompany them. In "We Have Been Believers" Walker recounts the spiritual transformations from faith "in the black gods of an old / land," to belief in "the white gods of a new land" (9). While faith provides its necessary succor, it is the act of labor that teaches the lessons of self knowledge. Black laborers begin to see themselves as "makers" like those in whom they "have been believers:"

We have been believers yielding substance for the world.  
With our hands have we fed a people and out of our

strength have they wrung the necessities of a nation.  
 Our song has filled the twilight and our hope has  
 heralded the dawn (9).

That the American nation could not have grown and prospered without the slave labor of African Americans is the underlying theme in a majority of the poems in *For My People*. In “Delta” the black laborers who are the planters and makers of the fertile valleys of southwestern Mississippi, sing of their contributions, their desires to reclaim the land in their own names: “If only from this valley we might rise with song! / With singing that is ours” (16). “Delta” is divided into three sections and moves from descriptions of the valley — its “[m]ud and muck and misery,” to the sorrows of labor — “not four ourselves do we sweat and starve and spend,” to a call to arms — “Now burst the dams of years “(18), “with our blood [we] have watered these fields / and they belong to us” (19).

Poems such as “We Have Been Believers,” “Since 1619,” “Dark Blood,” and “Delta,” trace the history of a “[p]eople of unrest and sorrow” (“People of Unrest” 23). The poem “Today” looks at contemporary black experience while world war wages once again in Europe. It is also a radical rewriting of Walt Whitman’s “I Hear America Singing” and “I Sing the Body Electric.” Rather than celebrating the possibilities of America, Walker focuses on its betrayals: “I sing of slum scabs on city / faces...” (24). She connects these slums of which she sings to the bombing of European cities and the “scrawny children scarred by bombs and dying of / hunger...” Then she returns to America to sing of her people as “wretched human scarecrows strung against / lynching stakes...” “Today” also gives Walker’s own credo as a poet: “I sing of Man’s struggle to be clean, to be useful, to be free...”

Like Lola Ridge, and Genevieve Taggard, Margaret Walker also represented the labors and desires of women. She also, like Ridge and Taggard, believed women were only one part of any movement for social change; men were the other part. Walker’s poem “Lineage” continues her interest in African-American labor, but this time focuses exclusively on women:

My grandmothers were strong.  
 They followed plows and bent to toil.  
 They moved through fields sowing seed.  
 They touched earth and grain grew.  
 They were full of sturdiness and singing.  
 My grandmothers were strong (21).

Walker makes an ironic testimony of gender power created by unfree women and memorialized by a daughter of freedom. She celebrates the “sturdiness” of women as they labor, yet in connecting herself to this laboring ancestry, she asks later, at the end of the poem’s final stanza, “Why am I not as they?” Walker suggests that her own “intellectual” labor pales in comparison to the labor of the women who came before her. She laments her own disconnection from the *real* work of her ancestors by asking how is it that women with far fewer choices were able to create and maintain unimaginable worlds against unimaginable odds.

Walker would spend the next 25 years of her life immersed in her own intellectual labor, teaching in black colleges in the south and writing *Jubilee*, a best selling novel, which has been translated into many languages. Published in 1966, *Jubilee* tells the story of Walker's great grandmother's life as a slave during the Civil War. By the 1960s, Walker is writing social poetry once again, leaving behind the rigidities of canonical modernism, and creating new poems for a new era.

Lola Ridge, Genevieve Taggard, and Margaret Walker, each a generation apart, bore witness to some of the worst atrocities in both national and international history. To ignore the contributions of these three writers, and the social poetry genre that they represent, makes it that much easier for us to forget the important social struggles that have been a defining aspect of American history. We need these voices of resistance now as we move into the next century. We need them to remind us of where we have been and where we are going. We need them to remind us not only how multivalent American aesthetic expression has been, but also how diverse our social experiences have been and—importantly—how tragic. These poets who have written about world wars and race wars, labor struggles and domestic struggles, and composed poems inspired from newspaper headlines and actions in the streets, can also tell us about the buried lives of ordinary women and men who also bore witness: to the horrific and the heroic, to the commonplace and the sublime, to the aesthetically different and the culturally different, to the daring and the mundane. They construct a past that is still useful to us in the present.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Qtd. in Stanley Kunitz, ed. "Lola Ridge." *Living Authors: A Book of Biographies*. (New York: H.H. Wilson, 1931).
- <sup>2</sup> Qtd. in William Drake. *First Wave: Women Poets in America, 1915-1945*. (New York: Macmillan, 1987).
- <sup>3</sup> Recent criticism has examined social poetry of the 1930s. Alan Filreis' *Modernism from Left to Right* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1994) is an impressive rereading of Wallace Stevens' poetry with the work of 30's poets on the left. Unfortunately he uses the same method of critical evaluation for the markedly different radical poetry of the 1930s as he uses for Stevens' work. Walter Kalaidjian's *American Culture between the Wars: Revisionary Modernism & Postmodern Critique* (New York: Columbia UP, 1993) looks at a good deal of radical poetry, reading it together with the visual and political culture of the time. The author questionably links Lola Ridge and Genevieve Taggard with the "Dynamo School," which centered around the journal *Dynamo*. Charlotte Nekola's essay "Worlds Moving: Women, Poetry, and Literary Politics of the 1930s" (in *Writing Red: An Anthology of American Women Writers* [New York: Feminist Press, 1987]) is one of the more recent American essays on women's radical poetry of the Depression. Cary Nelson's essays "Literature as Cultural Studies: American Poetry of the Spanish Civil War" in *Disciplinary and Dissident in Cultural Studies*, eds. Cary Nelson and Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar. (New York: Routledge, 1996) and "Poetry Chorus: Dialogic Politics in 1930s Poetry." in *Radical Revisions: Rereading 1930s Culture*, eds. Bill Mullen and Sherry Lee Linkon. (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1996) focus on the revolutionary aims of American poetry during the 30s.

- <sup>4</sup> In the 1970s poetry anthologies such as *No More Masks*, *The World Split Open*, and *Black Poets* featured the work of women social poets. *Social Poetry of the 1930s*, a selection of radical poetry, featured work by a number of women. Since the late 1960s, there has been an out-pouring of radical, class conscious poetry produced by women of color. The writing of Margaret Walker (the grandmother of the group), Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Sonia Sanchez, Jayne Cortez, Paula Gunn Allen, Joy Harjo, Mitsuye Yamada, Janice Mirikitani, Jessica Hagedorn, Marilyn Chin, Cherrie Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, Sandra Cisneros, Judith Ortiz Cofer, and Aurora Morales Levins suggests that a rich tradition of social poetry by women continues.
- <sup>5</sup> Interestingly, a recent “reference guide” dedicated to a chronological and intertextual representation of American women writers, *Women Writers in the United States: A Timeline of Literary, Cultural, and Social History*, eds. Cynthia Davis and Kathryn Davis, (New York: Oxford UP, 1996) includes the publications of volumes of poetry by Ridge, Taggard, and Walker as part of an historical time-line with far greater scope than what might be gleaned from a purely “literary” guide to women authors. These three poets, whose names, works, and dates, appear more than once, are placed within a complex, social/historical nexus of activity in the United States from pre-conquest and colonial beginnings up to the present. Ridge, Taggard, and Walker also appear in Paul Lauter et al’s *Heath Anthology of Literature* (Boston: D.C. Heath, 1997). This text, now in its third edition, is targeted towards the survey course in American Literature. The work of Lola Ridge and Genevieve Taggard appear in a special section the section on Modernism entitled, “A Sheaf of Political Poetry.” Margaret Walker’s poetry and an excerpt from her novel *Jubilee* appear in a section, “Issues and Visions in Modern America.” See also Paul Lauter’s *Canons and Contexts* (New York: Oxford UP, 1990) and Lillian Robinson’s, *In the Canon’s Mouth* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1997).
- <sup>6</sup> See Bernikow’s fine introduction to *The World Split Open: Four Centuries of Women Poets in England and America, 1552-1950* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974). She adds to the comment quoted in the text: “Women on the left in America have been banished from contemporary consciousness by the slow erosion of neglect” (45).
- <sup>7</sup> Muriel Rukeyser (1913-1980), a poet who wrote socially engaged verse for four decades, should perhaps be discussed along with Ridge, Taggard, and Walker in this article. However, Rukeyser is presently on her way to a full recovery, whereas these other poets have not been nearly as fortunate. Anne Herzog’s dissertation, *Faith and Resistance: Politics and the Poetry of Muriel Rukeyser* (Rutgers University, 1995), devoted exclusively to Rukeyser’s leftist, feminist aesthetic, is a major contribution to the recovery of a leading radical and feminist voice of modern American poetry. A line from one of Rukeyser’s early poems is indicative of how modern women social poets complicated their concerns about gender: “Not Sappho, Sacco/ Rebellion pioneered among our lives/ viewing far-off many-branching deltas/ innumerable seas” (“Poem out of Childhood,” *The Collected Poems* 3).
- <sup>8</sup> See the essay “Black Women in Academia” in *How I Wrote Jubilee and Other Essays on Life and Literature* (New York: Feminist Press, 1990).
- <sup>9</sup> Two recent critiques of Modernism suggest that the neglect of social class in modern poetry is a largely American issue. Jan Montefiore, in *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s: The Dangerous Flood of History* (New York: Routledge, 1996) devotes an entire chapter to issues of gender and class in British radical poetry of the thirties, not to mention giving voice to “underservedly” (sic) forgotten poets. Margaret Dickie’s and Thomas Travisano’s

*Gendered Modernism: American Women Poets and Their Readers* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1996) collected a series of essays on Stein, Moore, H.D., Millay, Laura Riding, Bishop, Rukeyser, and Gwendolyn Brooks. Though the collection's aim is to show how these poets augment the social, textual, and political spaces of modernism, all seven poets have received attention elsewhere, and the questions of class and working class subjectivity are secondary at best.

- <sup>10</sup> "Reveille," which appeared in Ridge's second book *Sun-Up* (New York: B.W. Huebsch, 1920), was widely anthologized. Of particular merit was its appearance in anarchist Marcus Graham's *Anthology of Revolutionary Verse* (New York: Active Press, 1927).
- <sup>11</sup> "Two in the Death House" originally appeared in the anthology *America Arraigned* (New York: Dean and Co., 1928). This text, edited by radicals Ralph Cheney and Lucia Trent, was dedicated exclusively to poetry about the case of Sacco and Vanzetti. In fact this trial produced more literary material than any other political trial in this century.
- <sup>12</sup> Conrad Aiken, for example, reviewing Ridge's first book *The Ghetto and Other Poems* in *The Dial* writes the following: "[Ridge] arranges her figures for us with a *muscular* force which seems *masculine*; it is singular to come upon a book written by a woman in which *vigor is so clearly a more natural quality than grace*" (83). (bold mine).

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