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Author(s): Julia Mickenberg

Source: *MELUS*, Vol. 27, No. 2, Multi-Ethnic Children's Literature (Summer, 2002), pp. 65-93

Published by: The Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3250602>

Accessed: 12/05/2010 01:47

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Civil Rights, History, and the Left: Inventing the Juvenile Black Biography

Julia Mickenberg

University of Texas, Austin

It is the “unique experience of Negro youth,” the playwright Lorraine Hansberry noted in the left-wing, African American newspaper *Freedom* in 1955, “that from the time he is born the Negro child is surrounded by a society organized to convince him that he belongs to a people with a past so worthless and shameful that it amounts to no past at all”(7). How were African American children expected to grow up with any hope for the future—indeed, how could they possibly be inspired to *struggle* for equality themselves—when history, for them, was “shorn of its power to enlighten or inspire?” (Collins).

School curricula and school *textbooks* generally supported the racial status quo during the years leading up to the civil rights movement’s full flowering in the 1960s. But many children nonetheless were exposed, in and out of school, to the pedagogy of civil rights. This essay highlights the ways in which children’s literature, that is, *trade books* (not textbooks) for children, became important vehicles for civil rights activism. Using the cloak of history, personalized as biography, writers on the left taught children African American history in a way that implicitly challenged post-war racial hierarchies, communicated radical ideas about citizenship, and made a direct connection between past struggles against slavery and present struggles for civil rights. Children’s literature became a key medium for dissenting ideas during the Cold War for a number of reasons. In this instance, anti-Communist “civic education” programs that developed after World War II ironically helped create a market for a genre of books that were a specialty of the Communist left, that is, historical children’s books, especially biographies, focused on African Americans. In fact, the juvenile

black biography was largely an invention of post-war US “progressives” or the Communist, post-Communist, and “fellow travelling” left.¹

Contexts

Between 1945 and 1965, the early years of the Cold War, more than a dozen writers on the left—many of whom were African American or Jewish, most of whom were women—wrote and illustrated books for children about American history, often using the medium of biography.² Focusing on four authors—Shirley Graham, Dorothy Sterling, Ann Petry, and Emma Gelders Sterne—this essay looks at the pedagogical role of children’s literature in the movement for African American civil rights. Secondly, it emphasizes the role of the Communist movement in the civil rights struggle: through literature, leftists taught children to question the logic of white supremacy.

Writing in *Freedom* in 1951, teacher, left-winger, and union activist Alice Citron argued that children in Harlem’s schools received a distorted view of African American history and culture, or no view at all:

They will never learn that their people fought for freedom. They will never learn in the public school that Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner raised the torch of freedom high. They will never hear the name of Frederick Douglass. They will hear instead that the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation were a mistake. (8)

Shortly after this article’s publication Citron would be fired from her teaching post because of her “subversive” beliefs. But her radical political convictions did not diminish the truth of Citron’s claims: she pointed to a real void in school curricula. A 1947 study of school social studies textbooks, done for the liberal journal *Common Ground*, found almost no discussions or illustrations of African Americans. Textbooks that did include some discussion of African Americans diminished or simply ignored their historic achievements as well as those of other minorities. Aubrey Haan, the author of the study, noted that “the texts omit the positive contributions of the Negro people to the physical upbuilding of the na-

tion, their creation of an original music, their part in all the wars the United States has fought, their importance in labor and political history, and their development of educational institutions” (3-5).

The bias against African Americans in school textbooks was partly enforced by textbook publishers’ fear of losing Southern markets: textbook adoptions were usually carried out state by state, with states’ approval governing the purchase of all local school materials. Anti-Communist hysteria also kept publishers from correcting racial bias in textbooks since Southern segregationists regularly argued that challenges to racial segregation were Communist-inspired (Dudziak 117). Indeed, Dorothy Sterling told me that any book by a white writer published before 1965 that was sympathetic to blacks was probably written by a Communist (“Interview”). She was exaggerating, but her point suggests the extent to which involvement in the civil rights movement, especially among whites, was linked to the politics of the Cold War: the post-war political climate created a situation in which those who challenged racism as “un-American” risked being branded as such themselves.

Beyond the concern about Southern markets and the link made between civil rights and Communism, the simple racist assumption that African American history was not significant enough to merit study was most responsible for the omission of African Americans from most of the American history children learned. In contrast, the Communist left and their allies argued that denying African Americans “an inspiring past worthy of study weakens them and their allies in the present-day efforts for equality and freedom” (Aptheker, “Negro History” 10). Part of the effort to keep African Americans “in their place” involved perpetuating the following myths: first, that blacks had historically accepted their subordinate position, and, second, that African Americans lacked the ability or the desire to participate fully in politics, business, and society. Needless to say, these were myths that any study of African American history would quickly explode (King 18-21). According to the left-wing historian Herbert Aptheker, “history is the people’s womb. From their history a people may gain sustenance, guidance, courage, dignity, maturity” (“Negro History” 10). If history was “the people’s womb,” then the child, though farthest from the past, was the thread between past and future; thus the need to arm children with lessons from the past.

The interest in history among those in the Communist orbit was twofold: first, drawing rather loosely on a Marxist conception of history, it looked to the past in order to discover the “laws” of historical evolution so that present activity could be directed toward the realization of a socialist future. As Henrietta Buckmaster, who wrote several books for children as well as for adults, put it in *The New Masses* in 1944, “History has no value whatsoever unless it becomes to us a living instrument for explaining how and why and when and with what weapons the people of the world have fought for progress, for enlargement of life, for defeat of whatever would seek to rob men of his birthright” (Buckmaster, Blake, and Fast 7). Along with the lessons for the present that might be found in the past, the left’s venture into history and national myth involved as well a project of reclaiming the past for those traditionally absent in historical narratives. This project, of course, was not unconnected to the desire to relate past struggles to those of the present. Initially, reclamation efforts focused primarily on the working class and they often led, in the first decades of the twentieth century, to the rewriting of familiar narratives: stories about Davy Crockett, Abe Lincoln, and the “pioneers.”

By the mid-1940s, historical inquiry among the left turned more and more to racial and ethnic minorities, as well as women, who had been left out even of anti-capitalist narratives of American history. As the Communist Party became increasingly alienated from the mainstream labor movement, and as the labor movement itself was hampered by an increasingly conservative political atmosphere, civil rights (that is, racial, as opposed to class) struggles assumed center stage on the Communist Party’s agenda. Although left-wingers wrote and illustrated books that focused on American Indians, Jewish Americans, and other ethnic minorities, in light of the growing civil rights struggle, African American history in particular came to be seen, in Aptheker’s words, as an “arsenal for liberation.” Given a growing focus in the Communist milieu on the “woman question” by the late 1940s, the Communist Party, according to Kathleen Weigand, “became a center of writing and thought about the experiences of African American women” and this writing focused in particular on black women’s history (Weigand 103, 107, 109). Thus history was central to the “civic education” project of the left, as well to that of the right. Children’s lit-

erature was on the leading edge of efforts to recuperate the history of American ethnic minorities, for reasons I discuss shortly. In essence, children's books were able to perform radically different cultural work from that of school textbooks because of the special status of children's literature and the particular dynamics of the children's literature field.

Civic Education and Children's Biography

Educational policy makers saw civic education as a positive way to inoculate children against the disease of Communism; it was both more desirable and less distasteful than reactive and negative measures. As William F. Russell, President of Columbia University Teachers College, put it, "There will obviously be far less need for teachers' oaths, Communist banning, textbook inquiries, when pupils are engaged in powerful programs of Americanism" (Russell 189). The National Council for American Education and other right-wing groups campaigned vigorously for making American history "a required subject in the schools of all states" and their campaigns were relatively successful (*How Red are the Schools* 9). By 1948, thirty-nine states required students to study American history before graduating from high school, and all but two states required instruction in the Constitution of the United States (Lora 252). Many states also instituted civic and citizenship education programs. Although most of these programs gave students a sense of how American government operates and provided some background on American history, the study of history in these programs was geared toward instilling patriotism and loyalty and was explicitly anti-Communist.³

Although teaching anti-Communism was thus one of the primary purposes of expanded curricula in American history, politics, and culture, the effort effectively created a market for books by Communist and other left-wing writers who, as I have suggested, were eager to correct what they saw as a biased American history curriculum, especially when it came to African Americans. Given what we know about the intense scrutiny of school textbooks by right-wing groups, especially in the years following World War II, it might seem strange that children's trade books about history would become important sites of influence for the left. Indeed, a history *textbook* written by a Communist, or even a "fellow trav-

eler,” was a rarity by 1950, despite proclamations by the right to the contrary.

But *trade* books were another story. They were employed more sporadically and less predictably in classrooms and thus were more difficult to monitor; consequently, trade books were not examined with any regularity by watchdogs from the right. Moreover, the assumed morality of feminine “child guardians”—children’s librarians, juvenile editors, elementary school teachers who regulated the children’s literature field—was rarely called into question, despite the fact that a left-of-center consensus dominated that field in the mid-twentieth century. Although they were mostly ignored by red hunters—deemed unimportant or too difficult to systematically monitor—trade books actually came to occupy a central place in schools by the late 1940s. School libraries expanded to meet the demand, dictated by progressive educational theory, for “independent learning” sources that children could use to supplement regular textbooks. For a unit on the Civil War, for instance, students might be sent to the library to select biographies of important figures such as Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses S. Grant, Robert E. Lee, Frederick Douglass, or Harriet Tubman, about whom they could report to the class.

Moreover, the same imperatives that led to civic education programs generated a demand for biographies of “great” Americans and sent publishers scrambling to find writers. Biographies were popular with children, and educators found them to be valuable supplements to course texts. They believed biographies could make history more personal and relevant, and could provide children and adolescents with role models (Brown and Brown, “The Teacher” 11; “Biography” 67). Largely in response to demand from the educational marketplace, several publishers of children’s books inaugurated major series of biographies in the 1940s and 1950s. Not only were many of these series enormously popular (children would often read through an entire series on the library shelf, moving in alphabetical order),⁴ the books were often of high quality. A number of these series were edited or supervised by people on the left and included works by radical writers.⁵ That juvenile biographies represented an important avenue for the left has escaped scholarly attention, just as the phenomenon, with few exceptions, escaped the attention of red baiters in the 1950s. Given

these conditions, writing books for children and young people emerged as a form of civil rights activism.

Civil Rights Biographies: The Authors

The remainder of this essay focuses on biographical works by four women: Shirley Graham, Ann Petry, Dorothy Sterling, and Emma Gelders Sterne. The former two were African American, the latter two Jewish (only Sterling is still alive); all four were activists on the left (close to, if not in, the CP) and were particularly involved in the movement for African American civil rights. All wrote biographies in the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s of African Americans, especially African American women, and other figures from the past who struggled for emancipation and civil rights. These biographies showed children a model of civic duty that hinged upon the need for brave, non-conforming individuals to struggle against injustice and to rally members of their communities to join in that struggle. Within these historical tales was an implicit or explicit commentary on the power of history and stories, and on education in general. This embedded commentary encouraged children to connect what they were reading to the world in which they currently lived; that is, to a social and political landscape dominated by Cold War repression and conformity on the one hand, and an increasingly militant struggle for African American civil rights on the other.

Graham, Sterling, Petry, and Sterne were all initially influenced by left-wing politics in the 1930s or 1940s. And all remained “committed” writers throughout their careers, even when “committed” writing was out of fashion.⁶ All were moved, for one reason or another, to teach children about people and events absent from or glossed over in school curricula and in most media directed at children. Finally, all were groundbreaking: by and large, their biographies were the first (or the second) books to be written for children on their subjects, though a flood of similar books would come in the 1970s and after. Shirley Graham, for instance, wrote the first full-length biography for children of Frederick Douglass that was published by a trade press and the first children’s biography of Benjamin Banneker. Since the time of their publication, at least fourteen biographies of Banneker have been published, and hundreds of books teaching children about Frederick Douglass

have appeared. When Dorothy Sterling published her biography of Harriet Tubman in 1954 and Petry published hers in 1955, only one other juvenile biography of Tubman had been published; again, hundreds of Tubman-related sources for children have appeared since. At least fifteen books have been published on Robert Smalls since Sterling wrote the first children's biography in 1958, and at least as many books on Mary McLeod Bethune have been published for children since Sterne's book came out in 1957. In their time, these books were radical, but their point of view and the subject matter they addressed were part of the children's literature mainstream by the 1970s. Though the work of these authors is highly significant, as female cultural workers in the feminized field of children's literature, operating in the further debased realm of juvenile non-fiction, these women remain, by and large, forgotten.

Some background on each of these women's lives makes more evident the connection between their political commitments and activities and their writings for children. Shirley Graham was born in 1896 in Indianapolis. Though distinguished as an activist, playwright, composer, and director, and as an award-winning author,⁷ Graham is virtually unknown today, remembered, if at all, only as the second wife of W.E.B. Du Bois.⁸ Graham's movement into children's literature coincided with the beginning of her civil rights activism. Graham became involved in civil rights work while directing productions for a YWCA-USO group at Fort Huachuca in Arizona in the early 1940s. There she witnessed blatant discrimination against African American soldiers, and she was appalled to see black college graduates supervised by whites with only high school diplomas. Graham began speaking out against the injustices she saw; authorities quickly branded her a "rabble-rouser" and dismissed her as an "un-American" who was using her position in the USO as a platform to agitate. Graham became inspired to write for children when she realized how little young people knew about black history (Perkins 71-72). She entered virtually unexplored territory when she co-authored (with George Lipscomb) her first biography, on George Washington Carver, which was published by Julian Messner in 1944. Over the next ten years, she would write biographies of Paul Robeson, Frederick Douglass, Phillis Wheatley, Benjamin Banneker, Jean Baptiste Pointe de Sable, Pocahontas, and Booker T. Washington. Later in life, she would write

biographies of W.E.B. Du Bois, Gamal Abdel Nasser, and the African teacher, Julius K. Nyerere.⁹

Graham became more and more active in politics in the late 1940s, speaking at an organizing convention for Henry Wallace's Progressive Party, and joining the peace movement and various organizations then labeled as "subversive." In 1951 Graham married the recently-widowed W.E.B. Du Bois, whom she had known since she was a child; they had become closer because of their shared activism. They emigrated to Ghana in 1961, seeking asylum from harassment for their ties to "subversive" organizations.¹⁰

Dorothy Sterling's foray into black biography was similarly motivated by a gap in children's literature and school curricula but also by her own education in African American history by way of connections to the Communist movement. Sterling, a third-generation, secular Jew from New York, was born in 1913. After unsuccessfully attempting to publish a (somewhat unflattering) book on *Time-Life*, where she had worked for several years as a researcher, Sterling, who had wanted all her life to be a writer, tried writing children's books: she started out by writing nature books about insects, puppies, trees, mosses, and caterpillars, as well as a few mysteries. She, like Graham, had been involved with early civil rights activism (eg. supporting campaigns in the 1930s to free the Scottsboro boys, nine black youths accused of raping a white woman), and she became increasingly interested in African American history, influenced by books like Herbert Aptheker's *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States* (1951). She began writing books on the African American struggle for freedom, dignity, and citizenship: subjects of her biographies include Harriet Tubman; Robert Smalls, an African American congressman in the South during Reconstruction; Lucretia Mott; Martin Robison Delany; and collective portraits of civil rights activists, female abolitionists, black Northerners, and blacks who lived through Reconstruction.

Freedom Train: The Story of Harriet Tubman, which Doubleday published to stellar reviews in 1954 and is still in print, was one of the first biographies of Harriet Tubman to be published for children.¹¹ Sterling chose Tubman as a subject because she wanted to write a book about an African American figure that would address civil rights issues and also empower girls; someone sug-

gested Harriet Tubman. “You can’t believe what an unknown figure she was—in the white community, not in the black, of course,” Sterling told me in an interview. “I would have never heard of her if I hadn’t been reading the left-wing press,” she noted. Reading the works of Herbert Aptheker and other historians associated with the Communist movement “gave a totally different perspective,” she asserted. Although she was writing in relative isolation in Rye, New York, away from any real community of writers, and not conscious of herself as part of any “movement,” she was, in fact, now channeling a racial consciousness that she had gained by reading the left-wing press and by associating with people in the Communist left.

Children’s literature took even longer to integrate than schools because of the concern with Southern markets discussed earlier; racism, as well as anti-Communism, made any subject matter relating to African Americans tricky business, which is what makes the work of these women so significant. For her part, Sterling not only wanted to celebrate a figure from black history, she also wanted her book to be illustrated by an African American. Delicately suggesting this idea to the art editor at Doubleday, who happened to have drawings on file by the African American artist Ernest Crichlow, the editor agreed. Crichlow had illustrated Jerrold and Lorraine Beim’s *Two is a Team*, one of the first “interracial” picture books; coincidentally, or not, Crichlow was also close to the Communist Party; he had, for instance, illustrated stories in the Communist magazine for children, *The New Pioneer*, in the 1930s. Crichlow and Sterling became good friends, and Crichlow illustrated three more of Sterling’s books after *Freedom Train*.¹²

Several of Sterling’s writings for children from the late 1950s, including *Tender Warriors*, a photodocumentary tale of school integration, and *Mary Jane*, a fictionalized story based on the same material, reflected Sterling’s interest and activism in school desegregation struggles. Moreover, along with other folks in the children’s book field (writers, illustrators, editors, and librarians), several of whom had been active in the Communist movement, Sterling helped found and build the Council on Interracial Books for Children in the mid-1960s. She also testified at the Powell hearings in the mid-1960s on racial bias in textbooks, and she actively

worked to bring African Americans and other minorities into the children's book field.¹³

Ann Lane Petry was born in 1908 and grew up in Old Saybrook, Connecticut, an overwhelmingly white New England town, where her father ran the town pharmacy. Petry's maternal grandfather was a runaway slave who escaped from a plantation in Virginia shortly before the Civil War, coming North on the Underground Railroad and settling in Hartford. When she was a child, this grandfather taught Petry nursery rhymes about running from the "patterollers," rhymes that reminded her of her difference from white peers (Petry, "Ann Petry" 255). Growing up in this environment of strong oral tradition, and as an avid reader, Petry began writing at a very young age, though in terms of profession, she initially followed in her father's footsteps by training as a pharmacist. She left the field of pharmacy after marrying in 1938 and moving to Harlem, where she worked for the New York *Amsterdam News*, selling space for their advertising department. Later Petry became a reporter and writer for the Harlem *People's Voice*, where she edited the women's page and wrote a weekly column called "The Lighter Side." As a newspaperwoman, Petry "observed her Harlem neighbors at close range and acquired an intimate knowledge of the oppressive conditions that circumscribed their lives. She gained insight into the ways in which racial oppression, poverty, hunger, and poor education ruined lives and devastated families" (Mobley 350). As editor of the women's page, Petry wrote about such issues as the exploitation of black women, crime, and the treatment of African Americans in the military.

Petry's experience as a journalist in Harlem shaped the consciousness that she would express both in novels like *The Street* and *The Narrows*, and in children's books such as *Harriet Tubman* and *Tituba of Salem Village*, though the contemporary scene figured into Petry's juvenile books only in as much as it marked the world she was trying to change by inspiring young people. Also important was Petry's experience working in community and labor organizations. After leaving her job at *Peoples' Voice*, for instance, Petry worked at an after-school program for latch-key children at P.S. 10, an elementary school at 116th Street and St. Nicholas. Of that experience Petry noted, "You can live your whole lifetime and

not be aware that there are children who are the victims of society. I found that appalling” (Condon).

Petry was inspired to write *Harriet Tubman, Conductor on the Underground Railroad* by the experience of looking at American history textbooks used in local schools and finding a grossly distorted portrait of African Americans under slavery (“An Interview with Ann Petry”). She had never even heard of Harriet Tubman before she decided, upon encouragement from an acquaintance, to write a book about her. Like Sterling, the more she learned, the more fascinated she became. And like Sterling’s biography, Petry’s is still in print, as is her 1964 juvenile, *Tituba of Salem Village*, a fictionalized story of the Salem witch trials from the point of view of a West Indian slave who was accused of witchcraft. Finally, like Sterling, once Petry entered the field of children’s literature with an eye toward the representation of African Americans in that literature, she began actively working for the “integration” of children’s literature.¹⁴

My final portrait of an activist-writer is possibly the strangest. Emma Gelders Sterne began writing children’s books before any of the other writers I discuss in this chapter, but she also traveled the farthest distance from her early books to the books she wrote after 1950, making the shift from Southern racist and author of nostalgic books about the Old South to Communist Party activist, civil rights worker, and author of defiant books for children about African American history. Sterne, of German-Jewish background, was born in Birmingham, Alabama in 1894. Later in her life she noted that never during her childhood or adolescence had she ever seen or heard of “an educated colored person. She had never even heard the name of a black man or a black woman who had done anything notable” (Eulogy). During her freshman year of college in 1913, Sterne, to her great surprise, heard W.E.B. Du Bois, an African American, introduced as the commencement speaker. She was stunned by the eloquence of his speaking and by the power of his words; she would say later that hearing Du Bois speak marked a turning point in her life, although the seed he planted in her consciousness took many years to blossom.

Sterne began writing children’s books in 1927; after her first three books Sterne wrote an Alabama Trilogy (published in 1932, 33, and 34) set at the end of the Civil War. The title of the first

book, *No Surrender*, indicates the general character of these books. Shortly after finishing the Alabama Trilogy, Sterne's attitudes began to change. Her brother, Joe Gelders, had become involved with radical politics, leaving his job as a professor at the University of Alabama to become an organizer for the Communist-led International Labor Defense, which, among other things, worked to build solidarity among black and white workers in the South. Sterne initially disapproved of her brother's radicalism, but she herself moved left, becoming, as she described herself, a left-liberal New Dealer. The Depression had forced Sterne "to see and feel the unemployed masses as *people*, with rights to be defended" (Eulogy). The rise of fascism, with its Aryan ideology, made Sterne look at racism in her own country. In 1939 she began work on a book about the slave rebellion on the ship *Amistad*; although she abandoned the project when a book on the subject came out in 1941, she felt compelled to return to it as she became involved in the civil right movement. Sterne's book, in print today, would be published in 1953 as *The Long Black Schooner*.

Sterne worked as a teacher, an elementary textbook editor, and then as a children's book editor in the 1940s, all the while moving farther left. She was an active supporter of Henry Wallace, but broke with him finally over his support of the Korean War. She joined the Communist Party in 1950, a time when the "romance of American Communism," as Vivian Gornick titles it, had long faded for most people. Sterne became a tireless activist for civil rights and other progressive causes, working with CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) and numerous other civil rights and peace organizations. Though as a writer of children's books Sterne did her share of "hack" work (she wrote the Kathy Martin series for girls under the name Josephine James, and she authored close to a dozen Golden Books), the children's books she cared most about were written directly with the civil rights movement in mind. In addition to *The Long Black Schooner*, Sterne wrote on Mary McLeod Bethune, the black scientist Charles Drew, the civil rights movement (*I Have a Dream*), Vasco Nuñez de Balboa, Benito Juárez, and, in *They Took Their Stand*, white Southerners—from Thomas Jefferson to Angelina Grimké, Claude Williams and Anne Braden—who stood up against the oppression of blacks.¹⁵

Civil Rights Biographies: Themes

Turning to the books by these authors, the plots need not be recounted: generally speaking, we all know them. But several themes consistently arise in what I would call the “civil rights” biographies by Graham, Sterling, Petry, and Sterne that illustrate how ideas circulating in the discourse of the left entered the cultural mainstream through children’s literature. My focus here is on the way in which these books operated as tools of the left’s anti-racist and pro-child “civic education” project. The left’s ideal of civic education, as it was manifest in historical biographies, entailed the following: first, teaching a history focused on the oppressed and the marginalized. Given this emphasis, included as legitimate history were not only the history represented in documents and written records, but also the oral history embodied within a tradition of storytelling and oral communication. In both cases, history was not represented as something static, or even something distant from the present; it very explicitly informed the present in the stories being told. Likewise, child readers of the biographies were implicitly encouraged to identify their present with the past represented in the narratives they read.

Second, in addition to teaching history, the books consistently linked their subjects’ values and struggles to fundamental American ideals as embodied in the rhetoric of the “founding fathers” and, in particular, in the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. Part of “civic education” for the left meant teaching *their* idea of civic duty: civic duty, in this sense, involved protecting, or fighting for, the rights and freedoms guaranteed in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. In the face of hegemonic racial and gender ideologies, this required independent thinking, defiance of convention, hatred of injustice, the willingness and the courage to speak out and act independently, and commitment to community and community mobilization. To the extent that the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and classic American ideals inspired the figures in these biographies, they could be said to be appropriating “Americanism” as their own. But these authors’ sense of civic duty was also internationalist, encompassing all humanity. In the final paragraph of Graham’s *There Was Once a Slave*, Frederick Douglass is quoted saying:

“though I am more closely connected and identified with one class of outraged, oppressed and enslaved people, I cannot allow myself to be insensible to the wrongs and suffering of any part of the great family of man” (305).

This civic education was pro-child because it granted children autonomy and the right to think for themselves; indeed, “education” as described in the books was a *process* that could enable children to think critically and independently, not an undifferentiated *institution* aimed at producing conformity. Finally, this civic education was anti-racist because it showed race to be a constructed social category used to maintain white supremacy. Moreover, it exposed mechanisms of racial, gender, and economic repression and suggested varying means of opposing hegemony, from political organizing within the bounds of the system to underground and covert (though, whenever possible, non-violent) resistance.

How, specifically, were these ideas embodied in the books themselves? Drawing on only one or two books by each of the four authors, we can find vivid illustrations. History and storytelling operate as significant themes in nearly all the books, at different levels. Sterne’s discussion of history, legacy, and memory in *Mary McLeod Bethune* is particularly politicized: the book opens by placing Bethune’s story within a longer history of slavery and within the context of a conscious, longstanding effort among whites to cut black Americans off from their vibrant African cultural roots. Moreover, Sterne comments upon the ways in which the maintenance of racial hierarchy under slavery and, implicitly, after emancipation, depended upon the repression of African American history and memory. “It was to the advantage of the slaveholders that the memories be blurred,” Sterne wrote. “It was easier to keep people from rebelling against the conditions of slavery if they could be made to believe that their present way of life, however miserable, was better than they had known in ‘savage’ Africa.” (*Bethune* 8).

Keeping African American history alive was thus a deliberate act of defiance, a blow against oppression. Bethune’s great-grandmother kept the memory of Africa alive and passed that memory to her daughter, Sophia; though sold away from her mother, Sophia passed that memory on to her daughter, and her

granddaughter, Mary McLeod. And Mary McLeod Bethune, the first in her family to have a formal education, became a teacher herself and insured that all her students, poor children in the Jim-Crow South, learned something of African American history and culture. As the central figure of the story, Bethune is never left completely out of sight, but she is not actually born until thirty-six pages into the book, precisely because readers must see her life in the context of slavery's legacy and African Americans' ongoing struggles for freedom. Both of these contexts inform the historical moment in which Mary McLeod was born in 1875: free from slavery but only, as her father points out sorrowfully, "part-way free" (37). By 1875, of course, the Klan and Jim Crow had begun to rob African Americans of many of the gains they had made since Emancipation.

In *Harriet Tubman, Conductor on the Underground Railroad*, Petry consciously uses history in another way, one that ties the oral tradition of storytelling, framing Tubman's immediate experience, to the wider historical context in which her story occurs and is significant. Tubman is told stories as a child by her elders, stories about the Middle Passage and about Africa. She is told stories about survival and about slaves' trickery and masters' foolishness. She is also taught songs from the Bible and freedom songs. Both Petry and Sterling emphasize in their biographies of Tubman the importance of an oral network or grapevine among slaves, through which both stories and information about the world beyond the plantation are communicated. The slaves hear stories about Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey in Petry's version; in Sterling's, a literate, elder slave named Cudjoe tells slaves about the Declaration of Independence, and reads them excerpts of David Walker's *Appeal* and William Lloyd Garrison's anti-slavery paper. Sterling notes that Tubman is stirred by the talk of equality in the Declaration of Independence and that she is surprised to learn that there are white people interested in helping slaves. But when she asks Cudjoe if "maybe they'll get us free sometime," he warns, "Don't figure on angels of the Lord flying here waving fiery swords at Master. We got to do it ourselves. Then, with the help of the Lord and the Abolitionists, we're sure to make it" (*Freedom Train* 35).

The message is a clear one, and one that comes up in many of the other books as well: that slaves and free blacks were vital ac-

tors in the effort to end slavery, contrary to the popular myth, still prevalent in the mid-twentieth century, of the “passive slave” whose liberation from slavery was accomplished only through the efforts of white abolitionists. Indeed, Sterne made an explicit point of noting that slaves and free blacks used every power that they had to end slavery: speaking out where they could speak publicly, petitioning when a member of the community was literate enough to make up a petition (slaves were, of course, forbidden from learning to read or write), holding meetings, singing freedom songs, and, occasionally, forcefully rebelling. Tales of every success, indeed, every effort to challenge slavery, whatever the outcome, gave slaves strength. Especially in Petry’s version of Tubman’s story, Tubman is said to have become a storyteller herself: all those who heard her stories or tales of her bravery were inspired.

Juxtaposed to this oral tradition, or parallel to it, Petry closed each chapter of her Tubman biography, that is, each specific episode in Tubman’s life, with one or several italicized paragraphs that point to other events that occurred in the same historical moment. These paragraphs are different in tone from the rest of the text: more impersonal, more “History” than story. Their inclusion invites readers to place Tubman’s story within a longer and wider trajectory of history. For example, a chapter describing the first time Harriet Tubman is hired out, in 1826 at the age of six, ends with a commentary on Thomas Jefferson’s death the same year. More importantly, it describes Jefferson’s “vehement philippic against Negro slavery” that was in his original draft of the Declaration of Independence (Graham’s biography of Banneker and Sterne’s biography of Bethune also mention this statement of Jefferson’s). Removed to placate Southern delegates at the Continental Congress, the final draft proclaimed only that all men had the “inalienable right” to “Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.” Yet even these rights were utterly incompatible with the idea of slavery: according to Petry, “many a slave carried the dream of freedom in his heart because of these words of Jefferson’s. Not because the slave had read them, but because they were written down somewhere, and other people had read them, and ideas are contagious—particularly ideas that concern the rights of man” (*Harriet Tubman* 29).

This point was fundamental to the left's vision of civic education: ideas are contagious. From the far right's point of view, civic education was meant to protect children from susceptibility to Communist ideology; for those in the Communist left, as well as for many liberals, its purpose was to spread their ideals of justice and commitment, ideals that were, in fact, more often based in American traditions than in Marxist doctrines. Frederick Douglass believed deeply in the Constitution, Graham tells us, insisting that the guarantee of liberty meant that by all logic there should have been no more slavery after the American Revolution. Douglass made it his mission to convince Americans to truly follow the Constitution, to recognize their own hypocrisy, a hypocrisy still underlying discriminatory practices in the Jim Crow South in 1947, when *There Was Once a Slave* was published. Graham quoted liberally from a speech Douglass gave in 1847 that condemned Americans for professing to "love liberty" and their "superior civilization" while the nation's powers were "solemnly pledged to support and perpetuate the enslavement of three million of your countrymen" (*There Was* 171). Douglass' rhetoric here is so close to that used in the Civil Rights Movement that, with segregation and disenfranchisement substituted for slavery, Graham could be quoting a Martin Luther King speech from the 1950s or 1960s.

The parallels between stories told about the past and the contemporary situation are often self-evident, but the past tense makes the messages far less confrontational. Indeed, Graham's 1946 biography of her contemporary, Paul Robeson, would be banned from United States overseas libraries in the 1950s, as would Sterling's *Tender Warriors*.¹⁶ Petry's *Tituba of Salem Village* (1964), like Arthur Miller's *Crucible*, could be read as a comment on McCarthyism, but in Petry's case, one that added racism to the mix by focusing on the slave, Tituba Indian. The distant context made the comment on "witch hunting," complete with a racist subtext, far less subject to controversy.

These authors exposed the contrast between proclamations of liberty and trade in human flesh; they commented upon the tragedy of privileging economics over human freedom and dignity in the name of national unity. In doing so they inevitably raised the specter of continuing horrors in the South at the time of their books' publication. Sterne, for instance, asserted in the Bethune biography

that the compromise on slavery “in the name of ‘unity’” by Adams, Franklin, Jefferson, and all those who professed to hate the “peculiar” institution, “set a pattern at the expense of the enslaved Negro that was to lead the new nation into tragedy” (*Mary McLeod Bethune* 10-11).

Almost all subjects of the biographies are shown to consciously appropriate the language and values of the United States’ founding principles and to act out of their perceived duty to make these principles apply to all Americans and especially to African Americans. Mary McLeod, impressed by what she learns in school about the American Revolution, “made the great language of American democracy her own” (Sterne, *Mary McLeod Bethune* 80). Consequently, she made a lifetime project out of civic education. Her school, as she envisioned it, would both prepare children for higher learning and give them practical skills; it also would be “a living part of the community.” As Sterne put it, “it would stir up people to do something about the Jim Crow laws and about the lynchings. It would keep men voting even if they risked their lives to do it. It would be a rallying place for the citizenship of the fathers—and yes, for the mothers too” (110).

A sense of “civic duty” is central to other books as well. Certainly it played into Robert Smalls’ decision to run for Congress, as it inspired him during the Civil War to take over a Confederate ship and pilot it to the Union side. Benjamin Banneker, a free, educated African American living through the American Revolution, is moved by Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* and by the Declaration of Independence. But he does not feel compelled to act on behalf of his enslaved brethren until a poor sailor confronts him, asking him to talk about what the “liberty” that revolutionaries were preaching meant for slaves. “I knows ye sma’t man,” the sailor says to him. “Ye can tell da people ‘bout dis liba’ty. No?” (Graham, *Your Most Humble Servant* 117). The poor sailor leaves Banneker feeling suddenly ashamed of his own taken-for-granted privileges as a free man and conscious of the responsibility that comes with freedom and, implicitly, with education: Banneker realizes that “he was a free man—free to act!” (125). He comes to see, with some prodding by the liberal physician Benjamin Rush, that the popular almanac he publishes can be a powerful source of anti-slavery and anti-racist propaganda. He also writes directly to

Thomas Jefferson, urging him “to eradicate that train of absurd and false ideas and oppinions, [sic] which so generally prevails with respect to us [African Americans].” He condemns Jefferson’s hypocrisy, calling him “guilty of that most criminal act which you professedly detested in others with respect to yourselves” (220-22).

If the principles of “Americanism” are adopted on behalf of the disenfranchised, oppressed, and marginalized of this country, they are not invoked as the exclusive privilege of Americans, nor do the writers use the biographies to suggest a hierarchy of oppression. We learn about Douglass’ insistence that attaining the vote for poor white men and for black men, and for women of all races, was part of the same struggle. Bethune, as Sterne portrayed her, insisted in her old age, as the Civil Rights movement was becoming a reality, that “whites and Negroes alike understand the current intensity of the Negro’s fight for status as part of a world people’s movement” (245). The commentaries on racialized injustice do not preclude a critique of economic injustice or gender constraints; indeed, the economics of racism are vividly exposed, and the struggles for the equality of black and white, male and female, are shown to be linked.

By reading these stories children are taught something of bravery, individual initiative, and community responsibility. They learn that challenging what is wrong is a humanizing experience that empowers others as well as oneself. They learn that when there is no way to make needed changes from within the existing system, it is reasonable and right to challenge that system, possibly by force when absolutely necessary: Tubman, in Sterling’s version, is said, for instance, to have supported John Brown, although with initial reservations. As Sterling puts it, she “came to believe his prediction that slaveholders will never give up slaves until they feel a big stick about their heads” (*Freedom Train* 130-31). Douglass, though aligned almost to the end with Brown, decided at the last minute that his violent methods were too extreme, according to Graham. In accordance with Graham’s portrait of Douglass, Petry suggested that Tubman ultimately rejected Brown’s violent methods.

Both Petry and Sterling described Tubman’s brave support of a fellow slave who runs away from the plantation where they are working: Tubman stands between him and the overseer so that the

slave can get away; in the process, a brick meant to halt the runaway lands squarely across Tubman's forehead and knocks her out. Surviving this battle is a great victory for Tubman: "Single handedly, she had fought against slavery and had survived," Sterling wrote. "She was no longer only a piece of property, like the horses and cows who dumbly did the Master's bidding. While still a slave in form, she was in spirit a human being and a free woman" (*Freedom Train* 48-49). The young slave, Frederick Douglass, likewise stands up to the "slavebreaker" Covey and in so doing not only conquers his own fear, but also inspires all those who hear about the incident. According to Graham:

His fellow-workers looked up to him with something like awe. Until now he had been just another link in the shackles that bound them to the mountain of despair. . . . But they had survived to witness a miracle! They told it over and over, while they bent their backs and swung their arms. They whispered it at night. Old men chewed their toothless gums over it, and babies sucked it in with their mothers' milk (*There Was Once A Slave* 30).

Sterne's Mary McLeod Bethune defies the Ku Klux Klan. Sterling's Lucretia Mott defies Quaker convention by speaking out when only men should speak out, by inviting African Americans into her home, and by insisting upon the right of women as well as men, blacks as well as whites, to vote.

Each subject of these biographies acts bravely and boldly, but always does so on behalf of a larger community, and always works to bring others into the struggle for justice. In that sense, education, or teaching, is a consistent subtext, either in the traditional sense of "book learning"—as Frederick Douglass teaches other slaves to read (Graham, *There Was Once A Slave* 49-50) and as Mary McLeod Bethune starts her own school (Sterne, *Mary McLeod Bethune* 118-27)—or, in the less traditional sense of education for survival, as Harriet Tubman's father teaches her how to find her way in the woods (Sterling, *Freedom Train* 39). Education involves separating truths from falsehoods, especially when young African Americans, under slavery and long after, were taught to believe they were worthless, less than human. Young Mary McLeod, singled out to receive an education, learns in school that Africans are heathen savages; this information conflicts, of course,

with what she has learned from her grandmother, and she decides she must not take all that she learns in school as gospel.

Children reading these books thus learned that independent thinking and rebellion against injustice were traits and behaviors worth emulating; they learned this at a time in American history, the 1950s, when children and youth were being vilified and branded “juvenile delinquents” for challenging adult authority, blamed for being angry at the hypocritical society into which they had been born. Mirroring the left’s critique of the dominant discourse around juvenile delinquency, we see how the conditions of slavery, like the continuing oppression of African Americans in the mid-twentieth century when these books were published, robbed children like young Frederick Douglass and young Harriet Tubman of their childhood, their innocence. “Although Harriet had not yet passed her eighth birthday,” Sterling wrote of a sunny spring day in 1827, “there was no running and skipping for her, no rolling on the grass or climbing on the trees. For her there was only work, and sometimes a stolen minute to look through the window and watch the birds as they flew North” (*Freedom Train* 12-13).

Although these biographies implicitly urge children to be brave, independent thinkers, children are also made to understand that *adults* have the responsibility, along with the power, to make the world better for the young people who will inherit it. Bethune, for instance, bravely anticipating harassment by the Klan, remembers words she heard somewhere: “If there be trouble, let it be in my time, that my children shall have peace.” By “my children” Sterne noted, Bethune did not just mean her own son, or the girls attending her school: “These, surely, but also the others, in flimsy shanties, in the turpentine camps and in cotton fields, in tenements and in back streets, in Savannah and Atlanta and Chicago and New York. Black-skinned, brown-skinned—yes, and white skinned—the children of the white-robed night riders, inheritors of hatred and ignorance. Let all children of God have peace” (183).

Lucretia Mott, Gentle Warrior makes an explicit commentary on child rearing as it tells the story of an abolitionist and feminist: Sterling noted that “at a time when parents were household dictators and children were expected to obey orders without questioning, Lucretia believed that a child, like all human beings, had inalienable rights” (70). Moreover, Sterling says of Mott that in “re-

calling her own childhood, she encouraged her children to think for themselves” (162-63). Raised a Quaker, Mott grew up believing in her value as a person. According to Sterling, “unlike Puritan children who left church each day with a belief in their own unworthiness, Quaker children believed in a God of hope and love; inner voices spoke of the here and now instead of the hereafter” (29-30). The Quaker philosophies of non-violence and social activism are also convenient filters for teaching these practices to children; to, for instance, a thirteen-year-old who, reading about Mott in 1964, would come of age during the rise of Black Power and would enter college at the height of the rebellion against Vietnam.

Although I have focused on books about history, the focus of these writers’ inquiries, Graham, Sterne, and Sterling all wrote as well about contemporary figures in the Civil Rights movement. Graham wrote biographies of Paul Robeson (*Citizen of the World*, 1946) and Julius K. Nyere (*Teacher of Africa*, 1975). She also proposed a book about the Emmett Till case to a Prague publisher in 1959 but apparently never wrote the book (Horne 150). Sterling, along with photographer Myron Ehrenberg, created a moving tribute to young people integrating Southern schools, *Tender Warriors*; a collective portrait, *Lift Every Voice*, of twentieth-century black activists Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. DuBois, Mary Church Terrell, and James Weldon Johnson; and a history of the civil rights movement *Tear Down the Walls*. Sterne wrote collective biographies of black civil rights activists, including Marion Anderson, Daisy Bates, James Farmer, A. Phillip Randolph, Thurgood Marshall, John Lewis, and others in *I Have a Dream*; and mini-biographies of white Southerners, past and present, who had worked for African American civil rights, from Sophia Auld and Angelina Grimké to Myles Horton, Anne Braden and Claude Williams in *They Took Their Stand*. She also (as did Graham, although hers was for adults) wrote a biography of W.E.B. DuBois, *His Was the Voice*.

Moreover, although I have focused on the ways in which these authors dealt with race, they also regularly challenged gender norms. By making role models of independent girls and women who refused to be limited by prescribed gender roles, and who challenged traditional notions of femininity and beauty, these and other writers on the left made a project of educating girls (and

boys) *out of* the “feminine mystique” when that mystique was at its height.¹⁷

In general, throughout most of the 1950s left-wing writers stuck to the safer medium of history, but in doing so they opposed the value system of the Cold War and the apparent “consensus” around it. As this limited set of examples suggests, the post-World-War-II civic education of the left challenged much of what was taught about the American past and present in schools and colleges and in the mass media.¹⁸ Children’s books by writers on the left laid important groundwork for young people’s involvement in the civil rights movement and in other revolts against the dominant social order in the 1960s and 1970s. They also precipitated a sea change in children’s literature in the late 1960s and early 1970s when organizations like the Council on Interracial Books for Children helped reshape children’s literature from an essentially “all white world” (Larrick 63) in the mid-twentieth century into a genre that began to account for the historical and contemporary experiences and aspirations of minorities, especially African Americans, and of girls and women and the working class.

Notes

1. My terminology is deliberately vague here. First, I should make it very clear at the outset that the writers I mention were *not* all members of the Communist Party; most, however, would identify themselves, at one time or another, as part of a larger Communist movement. Some of the people I discuss were, in fact, members of the Communist Party at some point in their lives, but unless they have been open about that affiliation, I have not discussed it here. Half a century after the McCarthy era, Communism remains demonized, despite what “Communist activity” actually meant for most rank and file members of the Communist Party (CP). Despite the notion of “writers in uniform” that came to inform popular understandings of Communists’ literary output, recent scholarship, most notably the work of Foley, has challenged even the way we understand the relationship between the CP and the “proletarian literature” movement; when it came to children’s literature, especially literature published by trade presses after 1945, the Communist Party had no *direct* relationship at all to an author’s work. As one writer told me very adamantly, “No one in the Party *ever* told me what to write.” Recent scholarship has encouraged us to move away from a fixation on CP membership itself as a fetishized category, recognizing that people had variable and changing relationships to the Communist Party and the Communist movement more generally. See, for instance, Wald.

2. Included among these authors and illustrators were Graham, Petry, Sterne, Sterling, Howard Fast, Merriam, Milton Meltzer, Langston Hughes, Buckmas-

ter, Arna Bontemps, Folsom, Elting, Meridel Le Sueur, May McNeer, Lynd Ward, Ernest Crichlow, Leo Huberman, Eric Lucas, and Bradford Chambers.

3. Indeed, many of the citizenship education textbooks were explicitly geared toward comparing “Americanism” or “Democracy” to Communism. Texts used in the public schools included such titles as: *A Comparative Study of Democracy and Communism*; *Democracy Versus Communism*; *Americanism Versus Communism: A Unit of Work in American History*; and, most pointedly, *Communism: Menace to Freedom*. See Civic Education and Citizenship Education materials in the American Legion Collection, Division of Community Life, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

4. Sterling told me of her daughter doing just this, and finding few books about women, to Sterling’s consternation; Paula Rabinowitz, an English professor, recalls doing this herself with the Landmark books, and she has told me that her son reads this way today.

5. Examples include Random House’s Landmark series of biographies, edited by Larrick; Julian Messner’s young adult biographies, edited by Gertrude Blumenthal; and Aladdin Books’ American Heritage Series (which included many biographies), edited by Sterne. All these series were well-received critically and were quite successful. Larrick, Blumenthal, and Sterne were all politically on the left, to varying degrees, and all published books by left-wing writers. Franklin Watts’ Real Book series, edited by Helen Hoke, was more formulaic, but the books were popular in schools and quite a number of them were written by people on the left (including Folsom’s *Real Book About Indians*). Blumenthal published a number of radical writers in her biography series including Howard Fast and Graham; Larrick’s series included a biography of George Washington Carver by Anne Terry White, the wife of Harry Dexter White (Secretary of the Treasury under Eisenhower who was “named” in the McCarthy period as a member of a “spy ring”; he had a heart attack before he could testify). Folsom, Harold Coy, Merriam, Mary Elting, and Jane Sherman were among the left-wing writers published in the Real Book series. Information on Blumenthal from interview with Rose Wyler, March 27, 1998; information on Larrick from interview with Mary Elting, January 23, 1998 (and further correspondence with Elting), interview with Lilian Moore, November 22, 1998 and telephone conversation with Larrick, December 3, 1998. Information on Sterne and her work with the American Heritage series in Sterne’s collection of papers at the University of Oregon.

6. On “commitment” as I use it here, see Williams. Again, by my use of the term “committed” I in no way mean to imply that they were all CP members. Sterne’s collection of papers at the University of Oregon make no secret of her affiliation with the Communist Party; likewise, Horne also states with a fair amount of assurance that Graham was also active in the CP. See Horne, 30-31, 140-49.

7. Gornick’s *There Was Once a Slave: The Heroic Story of Frederick Douglass* won the Julian Messner award for the best book by an American author combating racial or religious intolerance; *Your Most Humble Servant*, Graham’s biography of Benjamin Banneker, won the Anisfield-Wolf Award, given by the

Cleveland Foundation in recognition of “books that address issues of racism or expand our appreciation for human diversity.” Information on the latter award can be found on the Cleveland Foundation’s web site: <http://www.clevelandfoundation.org/awards.html>.

8. Horne’s recent biography of Graham may help to change this situation.

9. Horne’s biography of Graham avoids calling her biographies children’s books, presumably because the label would diminish them, but most were published in “juvenile” series, and several were illustrated.

10. In addition to the sources cited above, on Graham also see Graham, “Shirley Graham.” Horne’s biography gives the fullest account available of Graham’s life and political commitments.

11. Earlier biographies directly or indirectly about Harriet Tubman include Swift’s *Railroad to Freedom* (1932); Buckmaster’s *Let My People Go* (1944), which was later adapted for a juvenile audience; and Buckmaster’s *Harriet Tubman* (for adults), published in 1943.

12. Sterling’s *Captain of the Planter*; *Forever Free: The Story of the Emancipation Proclamation*; and *Lift Every Voice*. I interviewed Crichlow at his home in Brooklyn on November 20, 1997. He mentioned being involved with the International Workers Order; I had found illustrations by him in *The New Pioneer*, the Communist magazine for children, but he was vague about how he got involved with the magazine. Crichlow remarked in our conversation that a number of children’s books from the 1950s dealt with material that adult sources would not broach until ten or fifteen years later. Crichlow became a leader in the Black Arts movement of the late 1960s and a co-founder of the Cinque Gallery in New York City for beginning black artists.

13. Papers relating to Sterling’s writing and her work with the Council on Interracial Books for Children are in Special Collections at the University of Oregon, Eugene. Also in the collection is a transcript of her statement on textbook bias before the Powell committee.

14. Petry was active on the Children’s Book Committee of the Authors’ Guild, out of which the Council on Interracial Books for Children eventually grew. Petry spoke at a dinner sponsored by the Guild’s Children’s Book Committee in the spring of 1966 on “Children’s Books in an Integrating America.” Authors’ Guild materials, Folsom and Elting papers, Special Collections, University of Colorado, Boulder.

15. In addition to consulting Sterne’s papers at the University of Oregon, I also learned about her from a telephone conversation with her niece, Marge Frantz, Jan. 1999, and from interview with her granddaughter, Faith Lindsay, in San José, California, February 21, 1999.

16. All Graham’s books were, in fact, banned from libraries in New York City, but this banning was not widespread.

17. For more on advocacy on behalf of women among those in the Communist Party and its orbit, see Weigand.

18. On school history curricula during the Cold War and their orientation toward consensus and anti-Communism, see FitzGerald. On the mass media after World War II, see Engelhardt.

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