

PORTRAITS OF GASTONIA: 1930s MATERNAL ACTIVISM AND THE PROTEST NOVEL

By

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A DISSERTATION PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2006

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by

Patricia R. Campbell

To my mother, who died never knowing a world beyond childbearing and poverty.
To my children, Jarret and Cherish, who taught me about mothering and motivation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank the chair and members of my supervisory committee for their mentoring, the staff at the University of Florida and Lake Sumter Community College libraries for their research assistance, and the staff and faculty at the University of Florida's Department of English who offered their support. I also thank my partner Tracey, my family, and my friends whose love and encouragement motivated me toward the completion of this dissertation.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	4
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	5
ABSTRACT.....	7
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION	9
Maternal Representation as Discursive Strategy	9
Writers Go Left, Go South, Go Away	16
“Proto”-Feminist Politics and the 1930s Protest Novels	19
Theorizing a Visibility for the Undervalued.....	23
Protest Narratives and Maternal Activism.....	28
2 MARY HEATON VORSE: UNCOVERING THE MATERNAL MILITANCY IN <i>STRIKE!</i>	37
Labor Correspondence and Leftist Conversion	37
A Life of Contradiction: Militancy and Maternity	42
Socially Conscious Plot and Maternal Plight	45
Maternal Veil of Ignorance.....	50
Maternal Ballads of Union Solidarity.....	53
Maternal Muse of Militancy	57
3 GRACE LUMPKIN: LABORING WOMEN AND THE POLITICS OF LABOR IN <i>TO MAKE MY BREAD</i>	64
Mother Work and Mill Work.....	64
A Mill Writer’s Artistic Intervention.....	66
Mountain Myth and Material Reality	69
Cradles, Kin, and Maternal Caretaking	77
Grinding Bones and Making Bread from Maternal Bodies.....	82
4 DOROTHY MYRA PAGE: WEARING THE RADICAL RED SHOES OF MATERNAL SOLIDARITY IN <i>GATHERING STORM: A STORY OF THE BLACK BELT</i>	90
Maternal Memorial	90
Shield of Southern Tradition	92
Radical Red Shoes	95
Maternal Legacy of a “Fightin’ Spirit”.....	100
Maternal Challenge of Racial Bigotry in the Black Belt.....	106

Maternal and Material Contradictions	110
Maternal Solidarity: Marge Crenshaw and Ella May Wiggins	117
5 OLIVE TILFORD DARGAN: A VIVID RED MATERNAL VISION IN <i>CALL HOME</i> <i>THE HEART</i>	124
Envisioning Vivid Red	124
An Inheritance of Maternal Resistance.....	129
Marital Resistance and Material Reality.....	133
Maternal Solidarity in a Celestial Dystopia.....	139
Mountain Utopia of a Maternal Collective.....	144
6 CONCLUSION.....	152
Maternal Militancy	152
Maternal Solidarity as a Feminist Vision	159
WORKS CITED	163
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH	166

Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School
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December 2006

Chair: Stephanie Smith
Major Department: English

This dissertation examines how the novels of Mary Heaton Vorse, Grace Lumpkin, Dorothy Myra Page, and Olive Tilford Dargan invoke and revise the glorification of domesticity and motherhood to articulate an operative model of maternal activism. The works of these authors are analyzed as proletarian social novels where the authors' underlying motives are to move their readers toward a working-class sympathy through their identification with maternal representations.

The four female-authored novels include: Mary Heaton Vorse's *Strike!* (1930), Grace Lumpkin's *To Make My Bread* (1932), Dorothy Myra Page's *The Gathering Storm: A Story of the Black Belt* (1932), Olive Tilford Dargan's *Call Home the Heart* (1932). This body of proletarian fiction illustrates how female authors relied upon the depiction of the maternal body to represent and reveal a discursive strategy of female political activism and a lived history within the material and political realities of the Depression era. Based on the 1929 strike at the Loray Mill in Gastonia, North Carolina, each novelist depicts Gastonia as a seminal event in unionism by revising the events surrounding the life and the death of Gastonia's balladeer and maternal martyr, Ella May Wiggins.

By examining how these authors' fictional representations of a maternal figure, like Wiggins, is a discursive strategy of realism, a fictional attempt to represent the actual events at Gastonia, my argument hinges, in large measure, on Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering*. Chodorow's model offers a theoretical lens for understanding the maternal-based female socialization among the southern millworkers living and working within the Southern Piedmont region of the United States.

This study offers a valuable contribution to the body of literary research of Depression era fiction. The Gastonia novels epitomize how female authors manipulated an "acceptable" maternal role, where a woman's primary motivation for resistance was rooted in securing the survival of her children, in order to create a space for a woman's political voice.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Maternal Representation as Discursive Strategy

Ella May Wiggins, a union activist, balladeer, and single mother, was shot and killed on September 14, 1929, in Gastonia, North Carolina. She was traveling in the back of a truck with twenty-three other union members on her way to a rally to protest the substandard wages and conditions of the textile workers at the Loray Mill. While several arrests were made and motives were debated as issues of communist infiltration, working-class revolution, or the race politics of the “Jim Crow South,” no one was legally prosecuted and the murder still remains unsolved (Salmond 127-129). While the accounts of Wiggins’ death, union activity, and personal life vary, most reporters and historians identified Wiggins as a “mother of five,” or as a “mother of nine” to include her deceased children, or as a “maternal martyr,” as well as the composer of the union protest ballad, “Mill Mother’s Lament.” Her ballad reflects both the material reality of her situation as well as the motivation of the workers that led to “bloodiest strike” in history: “It grieves the heart of a mother,/You everyone must know,/But we cannot buy for our children,/Our wages are too low” (Salmond 133).

As the lyrics of her ballad show, Ella May Wiggins’ sense of self was grounded by poverty--her wages of nine dollars a week could not provide even the most basic needs for herself and for her children. Her ballad not only illuminated the plight of the Southern millworkers, but her lyrics also immortalized the historic resistance demonstrated by the millworkers at the Loray Mill in Gastonia.

Gastonia historian John Salmond contends that the shooting of Ella May Wiggins “had made her a martyr, a symbol of the deeper meaning of the Gastonia struggle” (131). The search for this deeper meaning begins with her lived historical experience. Despite the humility of her

heart-rending if somewhat sentimental ballad, biographical studies of Wiggins' life reveal a self-sufficient, independent woman whose philosophy of union solidarity and racial equality were considered, by the police and by her friends to be the primary motives for her murder.

According to Salmond, Ella May was born in Tennessee in 1900 and her early years reflect the transient existence of the May family: she and her mother moved from logging camp to logging camp earning money by doing laundry. She developed her talent for music, singing to the loggers at night. While in her teens, she married John Wiggins and began working in the textile mills. Little is known of John Wiggins outside of his inability to hold a job, leaving his wife to be the primary breadwinner. The couple and their growing family moved from mill to mill throughout the Southern Piedmont until he finally abandoned her in Bessemer City shortly after the birth of their eighth child. After his departure, she reclaimed her maiden name of May; birthed her ninth child, that of her lover, "Cousin" Charlie Shope; and was pregnant with her tenth child at the time she was murdered (Salmond 51-58, 166). Although Shope was listed as the child's father on the birth certificate of May's ninth child, there is no record of a formal divorce between Ella May and John Wiggins. To date, most accounts of May's life include her married name of Wiggins.

Vera Buch Weisbord, in her autobiography *A Radical Life*, remembers Ella May Wiggins as a striker who lived in Stumptown among the African Americans and came to Gastonia for union meetings. Weisbord had arrived in Gastonia as second in command with Communist organizer Fred Beal. Weisbord remembers Wiggins' contributions to union organizing and credits her as being instrumental in recruiting her black neighbors for the union. Wiggins advised Weisbord, "I know the colored don't like us. . . . But if they see you're poor and humble like themselves, they'll listen to you" (208). Ella May Wiggins recognized her black neighbors as an

integral part of union solidarity and brought union cards to their homes. Weisbord also remembers a threat on Wiggins' life about a month after the first walkout at the Loray Mill that may have been racially motivated. One morning Wiggins discovered that the spring that she and her family depended upon for their water supply "looked blue and had a chemical smell" (218). After Wiggins was fatally shot, Weisbord confirmed, "I am certain it was as an organizer of the Negroes that Mrs. Wiggins was killed" (260). While the poisoned water was one incident within a wave of terror against the millworkers, aligning the incident with Wiggins' murder on September 14 suggests the possibility of a specifically political vendetta against Wiggins dictated by racism. Weisbord's memoir names Horace Wheeler, an employee at the Loray Mill, as Wiggins' murderer. Despite the testimony of more than sixty witnesses to a murder occurring on a public highway in broad daylight, the jury returned a verdict of not guilty. Weisbord's autobiography memorializes Wiggins' life as a "[b]rave heart, songstress of millworkers, pioneer organizer of the blacks" whose death earned "her [a] place among labor's martyrs" (Weisbord 288-289).

The story of Ella May Wiggins and the events surrounding the strike at Gastonia inspired six novels: Mary Heaton Vorse's *Strike!* (1930), Grace Lumpkin's *To Make My Bread* (1932), Dorothy Myra Page's *The Gathering Storm: A Story of the Black Belt* (1932), Olive Tilford Dargan's (Fielding Burke) *Call Home the Heart* (1932), Sherwood Anderson's *Beyond Desire* (1932), and William Rollins' *The Shadow Before* (1934). Although each novel depicts a unique, fictional reconstruction of the strike at Gastonia, only those fictions written by women create a version of "Ella May Wiggins" as a mother who could represent, as a fictional compound figure, the collective experience of Southern female millworkers.

While most contemporary studies of Depression era fiction acknowledge the use of maternity as a trope for representing female unity among women, only a few studies specifically address the fiction of Gastonia written by women, and the representation of Wiggins as a union activist, motivated in part by her motherhood. For example, in her examination of the Gastonia novels, critic Laura Hapke argues that the representations of “feminine solidarity via the Ma Joad model” diminish the effectiveness of the fictional representation of Ella May Wiggins by creating a “female militant palatable to the dominate culture” (*Daughters* 172). Such a compromise, in Hapke’s view, reinforces a patriarchal interpretation that regards Steinbeck’s Ma Joad’s maternal role as a traditional nurturing and protective mother rather than as an active union activist.

What I intend to argue in this study is that although the Gastonia (women) novelists represent motherhood as nurturing and protective, in order to unify a female collective, they also rely upon presenting a Wiggins-like figure to suggest a more active more militant image of motherhood could exist. In other words, I seek to reveal how a woman character, like Wiggins herself, manipulated an “acceptable” maternal role, where a woman’s primary motivation for resistance was rooted in securing the survival of her children, in order to create a space for a woman’s political voice. Motherhood legitimized the women strikers' motives both for working at a time when women were facing hostility for taking jobs from men and for protesting substandard wages and working conditions at a time when most of the country’s population was facing a phenomenal rate of unemployment.

As these novels strive to demonstrate, women millworkers could recognize as Wiggins did, that they were not alone and isolated in their oppression; this sense of unity motivates them toward their active participation in collective, unionized resistance. My inquiry focuses on the

novels of Vorse, Lumpkin, Page, and Dargan as a “proto”-feminist body of Depression era fiction that relies upon a figure like Ella May Wiggins to demonstrate why working women’s oppression specifically as mothers might give these women particular and crucially gendered motives for striking. Although a figure like Wiggins appears complicit with her oppression in her adoption of a traditional maternal role, she is in fact, using the ideology that oppresses her to inspire union solidarity among the Southern millworkers.

The fictional representations of Ella May Wiggins in the Gastonia novels not only reflect a unifying identity of a female collective, but they also offered a means by which a female readership could identify with female workers in the seemingly safe domain of fiction. Readers were offered a traditional and sentimentalized character with whom they could identify, yet also be shown how a social consciousness might arise out of a specifically working-class experience. In her introduction to her study of multi-ethnic labor stories, *Labor’s Text: The Worker in American Fiction*, Laura Hapke emphasizes a need to examine the lived histories of working people whose lives were shaped by their presence in a politicized time and place:

[W]hile there is no unitary working-class experience; there are observable lived histories of workers, from seminal events of unionism to the everyday stories of the ‘apolitical’ communities and work cultures shaping the outlooks of working people. . . . My assumption throughout is that labor novels and stories originate in a specific time, place, and ideological milieu that shape their meaning. (7)

Hapke’s claim is central to this study, insofar as the Gastonia (women) authors attempted to reconstruct the everyday life of Wiggins as a working-class “character” whose life reflected the lives of a community where women were not only oppressed by childbearing, but also oppressed by their economic role of providing for the survival of their children. Historically, the Loray Mill employed both men and women; but the demonstrations of resistance were predominantly led by the female millworkers. The overwhelming presence of female strikers shocked the community and as Cora Harris reported in the *Charlotte Observer*, “If Gastonia has

never realized that militant women were within its bounds, . . . it certainly knows it now” (Salmond 31).

As Hapke notes, there is no unitary working-class experience, but this study asks: what unifying experiences could explain the collective resistance at Gastonia as a “seminal event” in women’s participation in unionism? Why would middle-class white women write about working-class women? What kind of lens did the female authors of Gastonia use to reveal their historical depiction of female working-class resistance? At a time when women’s wage work could be justified only by their visible poverty, how did the female authors justify working-class resistance? How were the material realities and the Leftist politics of Gastonia reflected in the narratives as gender, class, and race? In sum, how do the female-authored depictions of Gastonia articulate stories of a gendered, lived history of the working-class resistance in Depression era south?

The primary goal of this dissertation is to illuminate how Vorse, Page, Lumpkin, and Dargan’s use of motherhood as a trope helps to answer the above questions. By examining how these authors’ fictional representations of a maternal figure, like Wiggins, is a discursive strategy of realism, a fictional attempt to represent the actual events at Gastonia, my argument hinges, in large measure, on Nancy Chodorow’s *The Reproduction of Mothering*. Chodorow’s paradigm is a valuable tool for me, because she interprets the social bonds between women as an extended pre-Oedipal experience, which, she explains, is a sociological bond that creates a sense of unity among women. Chodorow contends that an exclusive feminine pre-Oedipal experience establishes a relational continuity between mothers and daughters that results in women producing daughters who also have a desire to mother. Chodorow also suggests that the lack of differentiation in the pre-Oedipal experiences of females produces more flexible ego boundaries

among women in their adult lives; as a result, many women seek to triangulate their heterosexual relationships with additional female relationships (Chodorow 92-100).

Although Chodorow's model of cultural replication is criticized for its ethnocentricity, it provides a plausible explanation for understanding a maternal-based female socialization among groups sharing a common identity. The continuity of the mother-daughter relationship into adulthood and the integration of female friendships suggest both a psychological need and a sociological expectation for a woman to create a maternal-based social bond with her female community. Chodorow's reproduction of an internalized cultural view of mothering also highlights the cultural reproduction of a traditional division of labor where women are relegated to a domestic sphere while men tend to a public sphere. Indoctrinated into a domestic tradition, rural Southern Appalachian women formed bonds with their community through acts of nurturing and caretaking through the rituals surrounding birth, illness, and death.

Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, in *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World*, notes how women brought the tradition of female social bonding into the mill villages. Hall contends that the women "performed rituals that reaffirmed the cohesiveness of the neighborhood. When a child was born, women showered the mother with gifts and boxes of second-hand clothes." Moreover, the maternal caretaking in the mill villages also extended to childrearing where the millworkers believed that the "[c]hildren belonged to the community as well as the family," and mill mothers shared in the care of infants and toddlers (Hall et. al. 169-170). These interdependent female relationships translated into a model of solidarity rooted in motherhood among the workers within the mill. Hall also notes that the workers' sense of solidarity was understood as a "multi-layered and deeply-felt" family relationship. The millworkers' understanding of family was not describing "their dependence on a fatherly

employer so much as they were explaining their relationships with one another” (Hall et al. xxiii). Hall’s study of the southern millworkers not only illustrates how their feelings of solidarity emanated from a sense of community, but it also reveals their feelings of solidarity were fostered through a shared sense of motherhood.

By 1929 southern female workers constituted 60% of the total number of textile millworkers at the Loray Mill in Gastonia (Salmond 30). Large portions of these women were also mothers who were not only bearing a burden of dual labor, but also depending on their wages for the survival of themselves and their families. The motivation for female militancy had very little to do with the politics of the Communist Party. The political unity of the female millworkers extended beyond their shared historic time and place to what they held in common, their poverty and their experience of motherhood.

Writers Go Left, Go South, Go Away

In January 1929, Michael Gold, editor of the *New Masses*, commanded young, emerging proletarian writers to “Go Left, Young Writers” (Foley 222). In the May 1 issue, four weeks after the April 1 walkout at the Loray Mill, Gold redirected the geographical course of his Leftist writers. The Southern Piedmont region, according to Gold, was the site of a working-class revolution where “[t]he battle in the tent colony in Gastonia symbolizes the advance of a new contingent of the American Proletariat—the working class of the South; . . . liberals who continue to deplore the use of the term ‘class-warfare’ should go down to Gastonia and reality” (qtd. in Cook 52). Michael Gold’s 1929 directive points toward a global political communist perception that counters the western perception of capitalism. In the 1930s, the politics of the Left reflected an ideology that condemned the ownership of private property and advocated an economic system of collective ownership. Hinging on the works of Karl Marx and the world’s perception of the Bolshevik’s overthrow of provisional government as the political rise of the

working-class, in the Russian Revolution of 1917, I use the term “the Left” to span a broad range of political identities within the United States in the early part of the twentieth century including: socialism, anarchism, and communism, in the same way Gold used the term.

Gold, a socialist who later joined the Communist Party, advocated for a working-class revolution in the United States that mirrored the Russian Revolution. For Gold, as well as for many other writers and artists who supported the propaganda coming out of the Communist Party in Soviet Union, believed in party’s vision of a working-class revolution. Interpretation of revolutionary change, however, was as diverse as the political ideologies that claimed to be the definitive cures for the economic malady brought on by the Great Depression.

Rabinowitz contends that female interpretations of working-class experience written during the Depression era resist the boundaries of genre set by the 1930s identification as “proletarian” because much of “women’s revolutionary writing” was fostered by rebelliousness of the 1920s. In the 1920s writers “revolted” against gendered Victorian ideals, as well as from the “muckraking naturalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (38-39). The novels of Vorse, Page, Lumpkin and Dargan clearly fit into Rabinowitz’s category of “revolutionary” because these novelists were not working-class writers, but rather middle-class women who were drawn to literary radicalism in the 1920s by a vision of a sexually liberating culture and inspired by the revolutionary politics of the 1930s. Revolutionary fiction, for the Gastonia novelists extends beyond the narrative of a masculine proletariat leading a working-class revolt against capitalism. Vorse, Page, Lumpkin and Dargan use the protest of a working-class mother and a female collective to reveal the social injustice of gender, race, and class oppression.

Much of the literary legacy of Leftist novelists has been recovered and analyzed by Daniel Aaron, David Madden, Ralph Bogardus, Fred Hobson, Alan Wald, and others, but critical attention to female-authored proletarian literature, until the late 1980s and 1990s, has been sparse. Critical attention to the female-authored Gastonia was fleeting. Bill Mullen and Sherry Lee Linkon, in *Radical Revisions*, note the publication of Tillie Olsen's *Yonondio* as the first step toward breaking the silence of the "unsung story of women of the depression and emergent women's voice of the 1970s feminist movement" (1). In 1983, *Feminist Press* responded to the need for recovering women's writing and reissued Olive Tilford Dargan's *Call Home the Heart*. Four years later, Feminist Press released Charlotte Nekola and Paula Rabinowitz's *Writing Red: An Anthology of American Women Writers, 1930-1940*, which revived the poetry, fiction, and reportage of thirty-six working-class female writers. As part of the series, *The Radical Novel Reconsidered*, the University of Illinois Press reissued of Vorse's *Strike!* in 1991 and followed with Lumpkin's *To Make My Bread* in 1995. Page's *Gathering Storm: A Story of the Black Belt* is the only female-authored Gastonia novel still out of print. The literary recovery of these works and the ongoing effort to recover even more of the work of marginalized writers provides the impetus for a growing body of scholarship in proletarian literature focusing on the representation of gender as well as the representations of race and ethnicity.

The recovery and critical analysis of women's Depression era literature has sparked multiple descriptive identities to discern authorial commitment or sympathies with left-wing values and goals. Despite Michael Gold's mantras directing writers to "Go Left" or "Go South" or "Write your life," he advocated for individual creativity. Michael Denning, in *Cultural Front*, contends that Gold maintained the diverse interpretation of revolutionary fiction and claimed, "proletarian literature is taking many forms. There is not a standard model which all writers must

imitate, or even a standard set of thoughts. There are no precedents. Each writer has to find his own way. All that unites us, and all we have for a guide, is the revolutionary spirit” (qtd. in Denning). Gold’s definitions for the genre of proletarian fiction open a broader area of interpretation for working-class narratives. Vorse, Page, Lumpkin, and Dargan, like many other writers, were guided by the political spirit of an era that inspired them to write the life of Ella May Wiggins.

“Proto”-Feminist Politics and the 1930s Protest Novels

The recovery and critical reviews of the female-authored Depression era fiction by feminist critics not only provides the impetus for critical analysis, but also implies a critical historical link between Gold’s revolutionary leftist politics and feminist politics. Vorse, Lumpkin, Page, and Dargan were initially drawn into political activism because of their concern for social justice. Yet, as their novels attest, the revolutionary spirit of these Gastonia novelists was informed by the political culture of the early part of the twentieth century that embraced a wide variety of political ideologies. Although their political choices evolved throughout their adult lives within the leftist political milieu of the Depression era, their revolutionary spirit and collective identity as progressive women who came of age in a period when female suffrage and early feminism were at their peak, lies at the core of their social activism.

Vorse, Lumpkin, Page, and Dargan were all born in the latter nineteenth century. By the time they were writing their narratives of Gastonia, they were mature college-educated women whose political foundations developed within the women’s suffrage movement. Female militancy, to these authors, extended beyond the pursuit of women’s franchise to encompass the social concerns of a historical period. Many contemporary historians refer to this period of social activism, in the United States, as the Progressive era when franchise served as a platform upon which women could participate in social and political reform.

Nancy Cott states that many of the female reformers during this period were privileged women seeking “cross-class alliances” whose activism “represented not simply victims to be assisted but a vanguard to be emulated” (33). The model of social reform for this female vanguard was grounded in women’s roles as mothers and as moral guardians. I use the term of maternal-based activism in my study of the Gastonia novelists, to represent an ideology of social motherhood practiced by women who crossed class boundaries and provided nurturing and caretaking as a model of activism for economic and political reform. Mary Heaton Vorse, for example, dedicated her time and her writing skills to a female collective whose maternal concerns led them to organize and implement a pure milk project in New York which provided milk for the infants of the immigrant textile workers. At the time, Vorse was a single mother struggling to raise her own children. Vorse’s apartment was not far from the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory where young immigrant mothers worked long hours and could not return home to feed their infants. Vorse’s dedication to this project was motivated by her identification with the other working women whose childcare needs were similar to her own.

In the examination of the early activist vanguards who fostered the activism of the female authors of Gastonia, my study also acknowledges the historical roots of feminism as the core of the women’s suffrage movement within the United States. While the term feminism appears as a broad, if not modern, term, the feminism that emerges out of the historical struggle for franchise was grounded by the practices of female solidarity and activism. Feminism, as Nancy Cott contends, was at its peak in the United States in the early part of the nineteenth century when the term feminist articulated the unified goals of progressive women who moved from their domestic sphere to advocate for “civic rights, social freedoms, higher education, remunerative occupations, and the ballot” (3).

As Cott, Weigand, and other feminist theorists concur and the Gastonia novelists confirm, the feminist activists did not disappear after the ratification of the nineteenth amendment in 1920. Franchise was only the first step toward a political voice for women. The goal of feminists in the early twentieth century was a “complete social revolution” (qtd. in Cott 15). Living within the historical moment when women’s political activism was modeled through a culturally prescribed role and at a time when women had gained political franchise, the Gastonia novelists envisioned the possibility of a major ideological shift in society’s social consciousness that reflected a female working-class vision of social change.

In his 1985 article, “Proletarian Literature and Feminism: The Gastonia Novels and Feminist Protest,” Joseph Urgo was among the first to examine the Gastonia novels through a feminist critical lens. Urgo contends that the female authors express a feminist protest and expose patriarchal oppression by showing “female subjugation through the realities of childbearing, sexism, dominating males, and a societal structure which assumes male primacy” (83). Urgo’s article focuses specifically on the female-authored Gastonia as a feminist portrayal of gendered experiences of survival and resistance. However, Urgo resists addressing the representations of motherhood in the female-authored Gastonia noting that the “complexity of the female novelists’ portrayal of motherhood might indicate the contradictory emotions that function produces in women” (82). As Urgo notes, the maternal representations are both complex and contradictory. However, viewing this complexity as compound depictions of motherhood as a discursive strategy of realism reveals a salient area for expanding a feminist analysis of the representations of motherhood as militant.

While the story of Ella May Wiggins’ survival and resistance as a southern millworker illustrates the burdens of maternity, the authors’ characterizations also suggest that maternity was

also recognized as a mother's authority within her domestic sphere. As Urgo argues, the physiological and economic effects of childbearing represented a harsh reality, but Vorse, Page, Lumpkin, and Dargan had lived among the women of Appalachia and understood that these rural women also took great pride in their reproductive role of childbirth and of caring for their large families. Alice Kessler-Harris contends, by invoking an idealized as well as institutionalized maternal image, progressive women drew upon the only authority granted to them by a patriarchal system, power within their domestic sphere (50). Additionally, the use of a reproductive body as a political body, according to Kate Weigand was a pattern of many progressive women of the 1930s who "defined themselves and their interests around the family and adopted a maternalist style of activism that valorized features of traditional femininity" (5). Although maternal authority has been historically subjugated by paternal authority, it has nonetheless, been perceived culturally as the domestic core of social order and the enforcement of moral and social values within the family structure.

However, Rabinowitz cautions that theorizing the valorized maternal trope "verges on essentialism because it invokes women's biological capacity to bear children without interrogating the cultural platitudes surrounding motherhood" (123). In this study, the legitimacy of female working-class activism hinges upon the foregrounding women's reproductive ability as its perceived, as well as its valorized, cultural interpretation as a "natural" vocation. The cultural perception of motherhood as a natural, as well as social, "right" legitimizes women's political work or wage-earning work as her moral and social contribution to society. Moreover, the female Gastonia novelists also shift the focus of working-class consciousness from the similarly valorized rhetoric of masculinity, depicting the experiences of an individual revolutionary male

proletariat, to the working-class feminist consciousness of a working-class collective, emphasizing the cultural perception of the feminine as both maternal and relational.

My study examines the novels of Vorse, Lumpkin, Page, and Dargan as “proto” feminist discourses of social protest fostered by the political milieu of the Depression era. The Gastonia novels advance the Left’s revolutionary spirit through working-class activism. While Barbara Foley highlights some components of fictional autobiography, collective novel, and bildungsroman within these novels, the underlying focus hinges on the strike at Gastonia as a depiction of class struggle which supports a social novel. Foley defines the social novel as one that “focuses on a strike or some other event in the class struggle and stresses confrontation over apprenticeship” (362). The social novel blurs the boundaries between the other components of proletarian fiction. Underpinning the social novel, however, is the goal of the author to move their readers toward a working-class sympathy through their identification with specific characters (Foley 362). Vorse, Page, Lumpkin, and Dargan draw their readers’ sympathies through protagonists who are mothers as well as active participants in a historical moment. The Gastonia novels, in this dissertation, are analyzed as proletarian social novels which narrate the lived history of a southern working-class female collective and their confrontation of class oppression as demonstrated by the strike at Gastonia.

Theorizing a Visibility for the Undervalued

In her introduction to *Better Red*, the late Constance Coiner calls for a kaleidoscopic social field of inquiry for theorizing radical women’s working-class writing (5). Coiner illustrates her kaleidoscopic inquiry as an interdisciplinary approach into the lives and the works of Tillie Olsen and Meridel LeSueur, which includes feminist literary criticism, cultural studies, social history, labor history, and biography. Although Coiner recommends expanding areas of critical inquiry, she also cautions researchers:

[C]ompensatory criticism “ignores or glosses over weaknesses and contradictions in writing by women, people of color, and members of the working class as a way partly to compensate for its exclusion. Our task is not simply to promote, but to understand the undervalued. Failing to engage the problems of working-class writing leads us away from its historical complexity (6)

Following Coiner’s advice, I expand my areas of inquiry to include interdisciplinary bodies of critical work focusing on the biographical, cultural, historical, and political milieu surrounding the Depression era and the strike at Gastonia. Although Mary Heaton Vorse, Grace Lumpkin, Dorothy Myra Page, and Olive Tilford Dargan suffered decades of exclusion as radical writers, my intent is not to gloss over the weaknesses and contradictions within their novels, but to understand how the working-class writing of these women was historically informed by the culture, the time, and the place. The working-class experience of a strike in the Southern United States in 1929 differs radically from the working-class experience of a strike in the Northeast or the Midwest. While Coiner’s ground-breaking study was one of the first to illuminate the writing of Olsen and Le Sueur, it also illuminates the presence of other women whose Depression era narratives were marginalized because they focused on female experiences such as pregnancy, birth control, and child care as well as working for wages. This study examines how Depression era southern culture, history, and politics specifically shaped the lives of working-class women in their compliance as well as in their resistance.

In “Gastonia: The Literary Reverberations of the Strike” Sylvia Cook Jenkins contends that in creating a proletarian hero from a “quaint southern peasant,” the Gastonia authors relied “on the sensationalism of atrocities—rather than an analysis of [the worker’s] causes—to produce a ‘correct response’ ” (64). Although the authors replicate the sensationalism that pervaded the news reports, their re-exposure of the brutality also served to remind their socially conscious readers of their participation in the oppression of the working class. The impact of the

literary image of working-class exploitation evokes a sense of accountability for those who buy the fabric without any consideration of the life blood that was lost in its manufacture.

Cook also insists on an analysis of “the sociological realities of the massive migrations in the South from cotton field to cotton mill” (50). She suggests a theoretical need to look beyond the sensationalism and examine the sociological realities of the strikers as a response to their material reality rather than a response to the political ideology as a method of mass conversion. All four of the Gastonia novelists address the sociological realities of the migration of rural poor to the mills as part of a material concern and a maternal concern highlighting the contributing factors as rural privation and motivation for a better life for their children.

The migrations of the rural poor into the cities occurred in the wake of the Civil War, when the Reconstruction of South brought about industrialization through the opening of railways, coal mining, logging, and the textile industries. Rural Appalachia proved to be a source of abundant, cheap labor that could be lured into industry by the promise of modernity. The migration of many families was motivated by a mother’s concern for the basic human needs of her family such as food, clothing, homes with electricity, and education for their children. Once at the mill, the rural poor discover that the promises of modernity that guarantee food, shelter, clothing, and education, are priced higher than the wages they are paid.

Studies by Hall, Salmond, and others illustrate that in some ways, the workers colluded in their exploitation through their conservative, evangelical religious beliefs that emphasized obedience and their passive acceptance of a paternalist factory system whose benevolence was reinforced each Sunday in church while their exploitation continued throughout the work week. While Vorse, Lumpkin, Page, and Dargan realistically portray these sociological factors, they also challenge the negative stereotypes that pervaded previous literary depictions of an ignorant,

rural southern poor. The strike at Gastonia is a seminal event of unionism that debunks the myth of southern millworkers as docile and ignorant pawns in an ideological battle between Communism and capitalism and illuminates the motives behind the strikers' response as a collective response to their material reality and to the paternalistic systems that oppress them.

Jacquelyn Dowd Hall also confirms the motive and the collective ideology of the southern millworkers as the collective concern for their families. *Like a Family* confronts the perceived rural ignorance as well as the material reality of the southern millworkers by illuminating the complexity of the cultural transformation of the southern millworkers through the testimonies of over 200 interviews conducted in the Southern Piedmont region of the Carolinas. *Like a Family* provides a sociological definition of family as both an image and an institution. The image of family is rooted in a rural, patriarchal southern tradition steeped in a deep evangelical religious base. The institution of family reveals a gendered division of labor and a structure of extended kinship that includes blood relationship and church family. The image and the institution of family play across the Gastonia novels as both motive and collective ideology linked to a maternal figure who assumes the responsibility for the material well-being of her household while she works for wages and guards morality.

Hall explains the interdependency of the rural poor as a social system where “[g]roup solidarity served as a buffer against poverty and, above all, represented a realistic appraisal of working people’s prospects, . . . casting one’s lot with family and friends offered more promise and certainly more security than the slim hope of individual gain” (172). Most families were acutely aware of their “lot” and the destiny of their children, most of who by the age of twelve follow the path of their parents and become millworkers. The millworkers cling to their shared

identity as family, which was universally understood and easily translated into class solidarity in their transformation from the cotton field to the cotton mill and from docile to militant.

In his praise for Paula Rabinowitz's study of female militancy, *Labor and Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America*, Leftist scholar Alan Wald notes that in bringing to the foreground "the issue of gender—especially female sexuality and maternity," Rabinowitz opens new areas of inquiry (52-55). More specifically, *Labor and Desire* prompts the focus of this dissertation as an inquiry into how the maternal representations of Ella May Wiggins reflect collective female militancy in Gastonia. Rabinowitz contends that the maternal body is the central trope in most of the women's revolutionary novels of the Depression era because it connects women through experience and reinforces the relationship between the individual and the collective.

Drawing upon LeSueur's assertions of female historical experience as "written in the book of the flesh," Rabinowitz theorizes that the female narratives of the Depression era are embodied and textualized as both labor and desire (qtd. in Rabinowitz 2). In her comprehensive study of more than forty Depression era authors, Rabinowitz genders the bodies and the texts of the working class insisting:

The body of the working-class man of the 1930s—and to an extent its text—is hungry, an empty space once filled by its labor; the body of the working class woman, as well as her text, is pregnant with desire for 'children' for 'butterfat' to feed them, and most significantly, for 'history' to change the world for them. (3)

Rabinowitz calls for the revision of scholarship that reflects the material conditions of the 1930s as a female embodiment of both labor and desire. This study illustrates how the depiction of Ella May Wiggins' labor and desire significantly changes a history that is "written in the flesh." The maternal bodies at Gastonia not only birthed their infants, but also bore hunger, disease, eviction,

and violent acts of castigation committed in the name of the law as a consequence for their protest against substandard wages and living conditions.

In support of her theory of gendered historical experience, Rabinowitz also draws upon the approach of labor historian, Joan Scott, who challenges traditional historical study by insisting the interrelationship of history and literature are both “forms of knowledge, whether we take them as disciplines or as bodies of cultural information” (Scott 8). Rabinowitz validates the narratives of working-class women as depictions of experiential knowledge and contends that “[t]he only way we know history is through the retelling of accumulated stories that are narrated, either literally or metaphorically, by and through the bodies of gendered subjects” (9). The atrocities depicted in the Gastonia novels are, in fact, literal historical realities reproduced within the fictional narratives and serve as testimony to women’s participation in what Gold refers to as “class-war.” Specifically, in the novels of Vorse, Lumpkin, Page, and Dargan, the representations of Ella May Wiggins as both an activist and a martyr, historicize the subjectivity of the women at Gastonia.

Protest Narratives and Maternal Activism

My dissertation is divided into four sections with each section focusing on the specific work of Mary Heaton Vorse, Grace Lumpkin, Dorothy Myra Page, and Olive Tilford Dargan. Each provides a brief biographical history showing how the personal and political experiences of each author inform her working-class writing. The balance of each chapter frames the individual novel as a feminist body of Depression era fiction that relies upon the maternal representation of Ella May Wiggins as a discursive strategy for challenging the prevailing political ideologies and inspiring solidarity among the southern millworkers through a working-class activism which used motherhood as a rallying cry.

While the novels of Vorse, Lumpkin, Page, and Dargan attempt to represent the lived, material experiences of the Depression era southern millworkers, these novels also reflect the political engagement of four white, privileged, middle-class authors with their working-class subjects. Like their subjects, Lumpkin, Page, and Dargan were women who were born and reared in the South, and their life experiences reflect their acceptance as well as their rejection of southern cultural traditions. Although Vorse was born and raised in New England, she arrived in Gastonia not only as a seasoned labor journalist, but also as the working single mother of three children who understood the historical impact as well as the maternal desperation of the striking female millworkers risked the loss of their wages. Additionally, all four authors experienced at least one pregnancy resulting in abortion or birth. In their recreations of Ella May Wiggins, they depict an accurate historical and gendered account of the female working-class experience that they had both observed and experienced as women living in a specific place and time.

In framing the historical activism of Gastonia's female authors, this study is deeply indebted to the biographers of Vorse, Lumpkin, Page, and Dargan, whose documentation of the authors' lived histories has helped to construct the relationship between writer and subject. Dee Garrison's *Mary Heaton Vorse: Life of an American Insurgent* depicts Vorse as the epitome of the labor journalists, whose life experiences chronicle the first half of a century of the history of labor. Vorse's experience as a labor reporter began with the strike in Lawrence in 1912. Her biography reveals a life filled with "maternal guilt" as a single mother, living in Greenwich Village and struggling to support her children as a writer and a labor journalist (Garrison xv). Vorse was fifty-five years old and a seasoned reporter by the time she arrived in Gastonia and began writing *Strike!* while she was sending dispatches to *Harpers* and the Federated Press. Vorse spent more than six weeks in the Southern Piedmont covering the wave of strikes through

the neighboring mills that began with the strike at the Loray Mill. While in Gastonia, she shared a room and established a close friendship with Communist organizer Vera Buch Weisbord.

While conducting interviews, Vorse established relationships with Ella May Wiggins, the female strikers, and other the female organizers. Vorse's *Strike!* is the first of all the Gastonia novels and by far the most historically accurate in its depiction of the events of the strike and the life of Ella May Wiggins.

Vorse establishes three points of view through the observations and experiences of three distinct classes of characters: the objective journalists who report the events; Mamie Lewes, the fictional Ella May Wiggins, who witnesses the brutality; and a fictionalized Vera Buch Weisbord as a female union leader who steps in for an ineffectual Fred Beal to implement organized demonstrations of resistance. The plot of *Strike* hinges on the development of the social consciousness of a young journalist and the developing militancy of her fictional Ella May Wiggins. Wiggins' observations reveal the specific historical atrocities such as the police brutality against women on the picket lines; the raid of a vigilante group on the relief store; and, ultimately, the union rally where Wiggins loses her life.

As a Northern reporter, Vorse appears to be separated from her southern sister-novelists as well as from her southern subject. However, her radical social consciousness has its origins in her own maternal activism at previous historical demonstrations of female resistance. Vorse is motivated by her social consciousness as well as her maternal experience, and her lived history aligns her with her subject through an empathic relationship. In her fictional portrayal of Ella May Wiggins, Wiggins represents the eye witness as well as the core of a working-class collective whose maternal-based activism inspires union solidarity and documents a realistic portrayal of historical female participation in the 1929 strike in Gastonia.

In her introduction to Grace Lumpkin's *To Make My Bread*, Suzanne Sowinska offers a brief but comprehensive biography. Although born into an upper class, Lumpkin grew up in a post-Reconstruction period of economic desperation where she can recall picking cotton on the family farm. Prior to living in New York as an active member of the Communist Party, Lumpkin worked as a home demonstrator and taught the children of the southern poor as well teaching at a night school for southern millworkers. At thirty-three, following the death of her mother, Lumpkin left the South for New York City where she shared a house and her idealistic vision of the Communist Party's platform for social change with Esther Shemitz. Lumpkin and Shemitz met their future husbands, Michael Intrator and Witter Chambers while they worked for the Party at the strike in Passaic. Although there is conflicting data as to whether Lumpkin and Intrator were actually married, there is a record of the marriage between Chambers and Shemitz. Scandalizing their neighbors, all four shared the house on Eleventh Street (Sowinska xvi). Sometime in the mid to late 1930s, Lumpkin became pregnant with Intrator's child. Friends believe that Lumpkin's abortion was the result of pressure from Intrator. Her relationship with Intrator proved detrimental professionally as well as personally. Intrator's expulsion from the Communist Party as a Lovestoneite in 1929 resulted in Lumpkin's alienation from her friends. She was not only abandoned by her friends, but Intrator also left her soon after her abortion. By 1948 Lumpkin adamantly denounced her affiliation before the House Committee on Un-American Activities and retreated back to her southern agrarian tradition living in South Carolina as a religious witness "exposing the evils of Communism" (Sowinska xix-xxi).

Lumpkin's fictionalized Ella May Wiggins originates from a period that Lumpkin refers to as her "Communist Phase," earning her the 1932 Gorky Prize as best labor novel of the year (Sowinska viii). As Barbara Foley suggests, *To Make My Bread* is structured as a proletarian

bildungsroman which traces the parallel political development of male and female children by contrasting their growing awareness of class consciousness (330). Lumpkin also integrates her personal experiences as a government home demonstrator and teacher among the southern poor by depicting Ella May Wiggins as a composite of two women, a mother who represents the rural mountain woman driven to the mills out of economic necessity and a daughter who depicts the mill mother who inspires union activism.

To Make My Bread is divided in half with the first half illustrating the sociological structure and the material realities of southern rural Appalachia. The first chapter opens with an infant Bonnie in a cradle and the maternal body of a widowed Emma McClure separated from her female community by a snowstorm while in the throes of a long and painful childbirth. Lumpkin aligns her proletarian bildungsroman with the characters of Bonnie and her new brother, John. The encroachment of the logging industry and the personal tragedies that force Emma and her family to flee from the mountains to the mills fill the first half of the novel. The second half of the novel documents the oppression of mill upon the bodies of both Emma and Bonnie McClure. At the novel's end, Bonnie dies, a militant maternal martyr on the union platform, leaving her brother lives to carry on a maternal-based solidarity and assuring Lumpkin's readers that "pain . . . accompanies birth—pain and sometimes death" (Lumpkin 373).

Christina Looper Baker's *In a Generous Spirit: A First-Person Biography of Myra Page* portrays the lived history of a radical writer whose political idealism led her to the Communist Party during the interwar era and through the persecution of the McCarthy era. Dorothy Markey adopted the pseudonym of Dorothy Myra Page to protect her family from embarrassment and later from political persecution. Born in Newport News, Virginia, Page challenged the traditions

of her southern upbringing that resulted in her belief that she was “held *up* by tradition and held *by* tradition” (author’s emphasis, qtd. in Baker xxiii). Page’s biography reveals a history of frustration where she was thwarted by her gender as well as southern tradition. Inspired by her fervent belief in social justice and the goals of the Communist Party, Page created *Gathering Storm: A Story of the Black Belt* as her artistic intervention. The novel was both criticized and commended for its adherence to the Communist Party platform. Page’s Ella May Wiggins transgresses cultural boundaries and offers answers to questions of class as well as to the “Woman Question” and the “Negro Question.” Page’s resistance to southern tradition is reflected through the resistance of her fictional subject to gender, class, and race oppression.

Dorothy Myra Page was the youngest and the most educated of the female Gastonia novelists. Actively involved in the Communist Party, Page and her husband delayed having children until 1934. Although Page was in Russia at the time of the actual strike in Gastonia, she drew upon the material of her doctoral research from the summer of 1926 when she studied the female millworker’s attitudes about children and work. While Page’s advanced degree positions her in a more comfortable economic situation, her doctoral research also reveals much of her heartfelt empathy for the southern millworker as well as revealing her political and feminist sympathies for the southern millworkers at Gastonia.

Page’s *Gathering Storm* begins in the mill village rather than the mountains and relies upon a maternal grandmother’s narrative for the sociological history of the family’s rural migration. The grandmother sabotages her husband’s potato patch so that the family can escape from rural privation and the children can get an education. Like Lumpkin, Page pairs her female protagonist with a brother and throughout the novel, and both develop a social consciousness. However, Page’s male proletariat travels north for his educational experiences in union

organizing and racial equality. Page's female protagonist, Marge Crenshaw, remains in the South; and Page documents a lived history of female subjugation with yearly pregnancies and capitalist oppression at the hands of the mill managers. Page also parallels the Crenshaw family with the African American Morgan family. Martha, the Morgan's eldest daughter is raped and murdered by the mill owner's son, and the historical events that reveal the ingrained racism of a Jim Crow South subsequently lead to the massacre of the entire Morgan family and mass exodus of the black families who live in the Back Row, the segregated area for African Americans.

Martha's rape and murder are depicted as Marge's first lesson in racial equality, and Marge carries this memory throughout the novel. Despite her oppression, Marge, female millworker, finds her voice as maternal militant who defends the union stand on racial and class equality. Marge shares the union platform with Page's version of Ella May Wiggins. Page uses Wiggins' maiden name, Ella May, to depict the lived history of the strike's balladeer. Marge Crenshaw and Ella May are linked as sisters and comrades, sharing similar experiences and supporting each other's union activism. The death of Ella May, however, does not end the novel. After Ella May is shot and dies in the arms of Marge Crenshaw, Crenshaw joins the ranks of union organizers and goes north to attend an even larger union rally and emerge as a female organizer inspiring working-class solidarity among her sisters.

Sixty-six-year-old Kentucky-born playwright and poet Olive Tilford Dargan chose the male pen name Fielding Burke and emerged from her isolation in the North Carolina hills to create her version of Ella May Wiggins as a working-class maternal heroine in *Call Home the Heart*. In the novel's Biographical Afterword, Anna Shannon notes that the gaps and inconsistencies in Dargan's biographical record may be attributed to Dargan herself, who "may have conspired in the destruction of the evidence of her political activities and contacts during

two of the periods of political repression through which she lived” (433). In a letter to her friend, she implied that leftist ideology inspired her vision of social change. Dargan claimed she was "perusing the *Daily Worker* regularly and assiduously" and that she was "still vivid red" (Shannon, Biographical 440).

Although much of her personal correspondence was destroyed in fires occurring in 1919 and in 1924 as well as during the Red Scare of the 1950s, the papers that were treasured and saved along with her earlier works offer striking evidence of Dargan's feminist activism. Shannon contends that much of Dargan's correspondence reveals "a network of women providing one another with their primary source of identity and energy" (434). The voices of Dargan's supportive network included feminists like Rose Pastor Stokes, a fellow socialist and one of the founding members of the American Communist Party; Alice Stone Blackwell, daughter of women's rights pioneer Lucy Stone; and Anne Whitney, a lesbian sculptor.

At age forty, when Dargan learned she was pregnant, she sought the support of her friend, Rose Pastor Stokes. Dargan left her husband behind in the Carolina Hills and spent the summer in the Stokes' home. Dargan's daughter was born prematurely in May 1907, living for only two hours after her birth. Shannon's biographical study reveals that Dargan's summer with Stokes not only helped her to heal physically and emotionally from her loss, but the Socialist atmosphere of the Stokes' home also strongly influenced Dargan's politics (Afterword 437).

In *Call Home the Heart*, the maternal body of Dargan's fictional Ella May Wiggins represents and reveals Dargan's feminist philosophy as a sharp contrast to the material reality and the cultural traditions of the working-class poor of the Appalachian South. Dargan's story begins with an adolescent Ishma Waycaster's early resentment of the rural patriarchal traditions that circumscribe her life as a woman. Dargan's protagonist runs the family farm that supports

her mother, sister, and shiftless brother-in-law as well as a brood of hungry children. Ishma soon marries; as she begins to replicate the cycle of yearly pregnancies of her sister, the farm fails due to a series of disasters. Out of frustration, a pregnant Ishma escapes with an ex-beau to a mill town in the valley. Mentored by the town's Marxist physician, Ishma Waycaster evolves from a volunteer home health-care provider into a maternal activist. Dargan "saves" her fictional Ella May Wiggins by returning her to the mountains just as the violence of the strike begins to unfold. Ishma returns to her husband and together they plan to convert the family farm into a retreat that will offer a healthy environment for the children of the millworkers. Ishma's call home to the mountains is more than a nostalgic call for a return to the past; it is a militant maternal call to provide for the future generations. At the same time, Dargan's feminist message is carried back to Cloudy Knob as an epilogue written upon the recalcitrant reproductive body of Ishma Waycaster who claims that she "couldn't go on living like an old cow. Fodder in winter and grass in summer, and a calf every year" (393). Although Dargan returns Ishma to the mountains, she also provides her protagonist with the knowledge to control her yearly reproductive destiny.

In *Labor's Text*, Laura Hapke contends, "some of the most important texts of worker fiction came from three radical women writers who told the mother's—and their mothers'—story. . . . Whatever their leftist biographies, Olsen, Smedley, and Le Sueur radicalized the maternal plot by documenting the work conditions of the blue-collar domestic sphere" (231). It is important to make visible four other female writers whose novels also radicalize the maternal plot and document a working-class domestic sphere. Mary Heaton Vorse, Grace Lumpkin, Dorothy Myra Page and Olive Tilford Dargan depict of a Depression era Gastonia in which a fictionalized "Ella May Wiggins" serves as a (female) catalyst for working-class activism that will change the world for the future of all children.

CHAPTER 2
MARY HEATON VORSE: UNCOVERING THE MATERNAL MILITANCY IN *STRIKE!*

Labor Correspondence and Leftist Conversion

Published in the early fall of 1930, Mary Heaton Vorse's *Strike!* emerged as the first of six novels inspired by the strike at Gastonia. As a reporter for Harpers, Vorse had spent almost six weeks among the female workers and had developed a friendship with Ella May Wiggins. Of the four female authors who portrayed Wiggins's life and focused on the role of women in a fictionalized version of Gastonia, Vorse was the only author who experienced the events first hand and knew Wiggins personally. On the day Wiggins was murdered, according to Dee Garrison's biography, *Mary Heaton Vorse: The Life of an American Insurgent*, both Vorse and Wiggins were en route to the same union rally. Vorse's car was blocked by an angry mob, but police intervention saved Vorse and the car's other occupants. At the same time, some distance past Vorse's vehicle, the truck in which Wiggins was riding was also blocked by another group of vigilantes; guns were fired and Wiggins was fatally shot (Garrison, Introduction 229).

Hearing the news of Wiggins' murder, Vorse recalled Wiggins' last words to her: "I belong to the union because of my children. I haven't been able to do anything for them. . . . But when they grow up, they won't have to work twelve hours a day for nine dollars a week They would have to kill me to make me leave the union" (Garrison, Introduction 229). Though Vorse sent dispatches to Harpers and the Federated Press, the reports appear to have fallen short of conveying the maternal motives of the murdered woman. Vorse's reports also fell short of conveying the story of the maternal activism that drew Wiggins toward union solidarity and that fateful journey to the rally.

Along with writing her dispatches, Vorse also began writing her novel, *Strike!* Vorse integrates the actual historical events occurring in Gastonia as well as in neighboring mill towns

throughout the Southern Piedmont. The historical reality within *Strike!* extends beyond the reported acts of oppression and demands a class-based accountability. Vorse reveals Wiggins' murderers as the class of "comfortable people"(12) who resort to mob violence out of ignorance, rather than a nameless capitalist system. Vorse's novel specifically focuses on Wiggins, not as a singular protagonist or victim, but as the core of a female collective whose activism was motivated by her desire to earn a living and create a better life for her children and whose death was a class-based political act of violence.

As a labor journalist and freelance writer, Mary Heaton Vorse arrived at Gastonia with extensive experience in documenting strikes and an acute understanding of the concerns of working mothers. Vorse was the mother of two when she arrived at the Lawrence Strike in 1912, and her career in labor journalism reveals a sweeping historical chronology of the labor movement including the 1916 Mesabi Range Strike; the 1919 National Steel strike; the 1920 Amalgamated Clothing Workers' strike and the 1926 Passaic Strike (Garrison *Mary* xiii-xvi). In addition to her reportage, Vorse produced a massive collection of articles and stories, as well as two plays and sixteen books, all of which Garrison notes, are marked by Vorse's "consistent attention to the special concerns of women" (*Mary* x). Vorse's understanding of women's concerns came from her personal and her professional experiences as a working mother.

Despite the recognition and critical acclaim of her career as a radical writer, Vorse struggled with an intense sense of failure in her attempt to balance her professional role as a labor activist and reporter and her personal role as a wife and a mother. Garrison states that the professional and personal contradictions of Vorse's life experiences give her life its "greatest poignancy" (xvii). In 1922, following her disastrous affair with Robert Minor, Vorse suffered a

miscarriage and fell into a dark depression. Focusing on her “neglect” of her children, Vorse draws a self-defeating portrait of maternal guilt:

My failure is that of almost every working woman who has children and a home to keep up, whether she scrubs floors, or works in mills, or is a high-priced professional woman. It’s nearly impossible to do both jobs well. So most women fail in either or both. . . . Are two things possible? Must there always be a double failure? (qtd. Garrison, *Mary* xv).

Vorse’s sense of double failure reflects a distinctly female conflict between the demands of mothering and the demands of working for wages. In her inclusive description of “almost every working woman,” Vorse implies a collective maternal experience that unites working women and stretches across class boundaries spanning the most menial to the most prestigious of professions. Vorse’s focus on the roles of women reveals an attempt to negotiate the conflict between a woman’s reproductive role and her professional role.

As part of a larger project of examining the relationship of maternal representations used in women’s revolutionary fiction, this chapter explores Vorse’s fictional representation of the life of Ella May Wiggins as a maternal activist whose narrative voice reflects the professional and personal struggles of the working-class maternal collective in Gastonia. This chapter briefly addresses how the contradictions between the personal and political experiences of Mary Heaton Vorse inform her fictional representation of Wiggins’ maternal activism in *Strike!* The balance of the chapter focuses on Vorse’s fictional portrayal of Ella May Wiggins as the core of a working-class collective whose maternal-based activism inspires union solidarity and documents a realistic portrayal of historical female participation in the 1929 strike in Gastonia.

The plot of *Strike!* is loosely based on the radical conversion of a young naïve reporter, Roger Hewlett, into a man with a working-class consciousness. Hewlett is closely mentored by an older more seasoned reporter, Ed Hoskins, who provides an informative summary of Gastonia’s local history and culture, as well as the historical background of working-class

resistance. Hoskins' narrative of experience spans Vorse's own career in labor journalism beginning with the Lawrence strike in 1912 through the Passaic Strike in 1926. In the novel's introduction, Garrison contends that the characterizations of Hewlett and Hoskins are representative of the various stages in Vorse's career in journalism, as well as representing a more authoritative voice in a profession dominated by men. Additionally, Garrison suggests that the political conversion of Hewlett reflects the development of Vorse's own working-class consciousness (Introduction xv).

Most critics concur that the plot of *Strike!* relies upon the presence of Hewlett and Hoskins for its unity and its message of political conversion. However, viewing the novel from a maternal lens reveals historical moments of female activism at the core of the reporters' consciousness-raising narratives. Although the journalists observed, reported, and were transformed by the strike, the heart of Vorse's novel lies in the collective strength of the women who experienced the physical, emotional, and economic brutality. *Strike!* illustrates the message of maternal solidarity in the strike at Stonerton through the character of Mamie Lewes. Lewes' participation and eye-witness accounts document the experiences of a female collective whose maternal-based activism not only inspires working-class militancy, but also portrays a history of injustice meant to inspire a social consciousness within the hearts of the middle to upper classes.

Joseph Urgo notes that upon its release, *Strike!* was highly praised by reviewers for its truthful depiction and its "moral purpose," however, the novel was also criticized as a "second-rate piece of fiction" (68). In his 1930 review for the *Nation*, Sinclair Lewis concurs with most of Vorse's contemporaries and contends that *Strike!* is more a "statement of facts than a novel" (qtd. in Urgo 68). *Strike!* did not meet the expectations of the reviewers in the 1930s because it defied the formulas for both bourgeois and proletarian fiction in its lack of a specific singular

protagonist. Although Vorse's historical facts appear to overshadow the literary quality of her novel, the female testimonies beneath her historical reportage reveal an in-depth coverage of human experience.

In her contemporary study, Barbara Foley notes that Vorse's extensive use of historical facts reflect a "documentarism" that is characteristic of a collective novel. According to Foley, the documentation of facts "links the text's collective protagonist to historical actuality by multiple threads of reference." Moreover, Foley asserts that a collective "novel has no hero because reality has no hero" (420). The strike at Gastonia extends beyond traditional representations of northern and western industrial strikes with the heroic revolutionary male proletariat because the strikers were predominantly female. Written from a journalist's perspective, there is no single protagonist to act as a heroine. Vorse posits her fictional Wiggins within the historical events as part of the collective's resistance. Therefore, Vorse depicts the strike at Gastonia through the multiple threads of collective female experiences of the striking millworkers.

In the opening chapter, Vorse confronts the limits of journalism and suggests the possibility of a story behind a story through her characterization of Roger Hewlett. The reporter's questions highlight how even the most realistic documentation of collective human experience cannot be reduced to the space of a headline or a summary lead in a newspaper. Hewlett asks: "How can you tell people who have never seen a strike what it means to the people who are striking? How can one indicate in the space of a few pages what makes people strike? How are you going to make other people feel terror?" (17). In *Strike!*, Vorse lifts journalism's objective and editorial veil to make people see, feel, and understand what motivates the militancy of the millworkers. Vorse also lifts journalism's objective and editorial veil to make

the comfortable people feel the terror at Gastonia and recognize their accountability for the brutality against the female millworkers and for the murder of Wiggins. Through her depiction of Wiggins, Vorse reveals the story behind the headlines and illustrates the meaning of a strike as the collective belief that “a strike is about life” and “life is more important than business” (14). Vorse characterizes the lives of the Southern millworkers as a maternal collective who believe that the lives of their children are more important than the textile business in North Carolina.

A Life of Contradiction: Militancy and Maternity

Vorse’s perceptions of motherhood and gender relations were diametrically opposed to her mother’s Victorian ideals of femininity; her resistance resulted in severe economic consequences. As a child born into an upper-class eccentric New England family who avoided the society of Amherst, young Mary Heaton was surrounded with five older siblings from her mother’s first marriage. Vorse was youngest and only child of Ellen Marvin Heaton and Hiram Heaton. Vorse’s mother inherited her first husband’s estate and maintained control of the family’s finances as she steered her sons toward successful economic careers and her daughters toward successful economic marriages. When Vorse defied her mother’s traditional ambitions for her and expressed her desire for a writing career, her father cautioned her that he was powerless and could not support her decisions. Hiram Heaton explained that he was not his wife’s equal, but rather his position was one of servitude to “the Queen of Persia” (Garrison, *Mary* 20). Vorse defied the “queen” and pursued her writing. The power of Vorse’s mother over her husband and her children was painfully demonstrated through extended silences and finally through disinheritance, leaving a widowed Vorse struggling to support herself and her children for most of her adult life.

At eighteen, Mary Heaton met and secretly married Bert Vorse, a thirty-two year old newspaper reporter and aspiring author, and moved into an apartment in Greenwich Village.

Shortly after the birth of their son, Mary wrote and sold love stories for women's magazines to supplement the family income while Bert struggled with his own writing career. As the marriage floundered through her husband's defeats and infidelities, Mary "opted to ease [his] suffering through maternal solicitude" (Garrison 35). Vorse set aside her writing, sweetly tended to her husband's childish behavior and birthed a second child, Ellen. Yet, Vorse discovered another of Bert Vorse's affairs and again, attempted reconciliation in an attempt to save her marriage. The family's tour of Europe in 1909 appears to be the pivotal moment marking the end of the Vorses' marriage as Bert returned to New York and Mary remained in Europe. Bert died on June 14, 1910 of a cerebral hemorrhage, freeing Mary from her marital constraints. The next day, June 15, Vorse's mother died of heart failure, leaving Vorse without a penny of inheritance (Garrison *Mary* 44).

After the deaths of her husband and mother, Vorse wrote in earnest. According to Garrison, Vorse's fiction reflects the transformation of a nineteenth-century Victorian ideal of maternal love as a selfless form of female superiority to a "demonstration of men's inferiority" (*Mary* 41-44). In writing for women's magazines, Vorse created narratives that exposed the idealized marital myths. Vorse's fiction depicted mothers who were frustrated, bored, tired, and even angry at meeting the ever-constant demands of motherhood. Vorse's stories gained popularity and helped to stabilize her financially.

Garrison's biography notes three transforming experiences that were pivotal in Vorse's development of a class consciousness and that inspired her commitment to working mothers and the politics of labor. In 1910, living in Greenwich Village as a single working mother, Vorse joined the New York Milk Committee as a writer publicizing the need for pure milk. The committee provided milk for the babies of the immigrant mothers who worked in the garment

district and could not take time away from their jobs to nurse their infants. Many reports attributed the infant death rate to either inherent ethnic traits or flagrant neglect of the immigrant mothers. Vorse responded to the accusations with passionate claims against the sale of contaminated milk that risked the lives of working-class infants to make more money for the wealthy (48). Vorse's concern for lives of immigrants' babies led her to yet another realization in 1911 when she witnessed the loss of the lives of the mothers who worked at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company. According to Garrison's biography, Vorse ran eight blocks from her apartment and watched in horror as women threw themselves from the windows of a burning building because the exit doors were locked and the firemen's ladders reached only as high as the sixth floor. Vorse stood helpless and in shock as she stared at the bodies of the mothers who would not be returning home to nurse their babies at the end of their work day (Garrison, *Mary* 49).

One year later, in 1912, Vorse's activism was again sparked by maternal concern when she convinced *Harper's Weekly* to send her to Lawrence where the mill owners had arrested fifteen children and their mothers who were boarding a train to Philadelphia to escape the violence of the strike. Although the beating and jailing of strikers appeared to go unnoticed, deterring the interstate travel of women and children to safety resulted in a public outcry and sparked a national investigation (Garrison, *Mary* 48-61). While in Lawrence, Vorse met Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, who became her friend and confidant, and Joe O'Brien, who became her second husband. Vorse returned from Lawrence with a newfound career in radical journalism. In witnessing the atrocities occurring in New York and Massachusetts, Vorse realized that she was she was ignorant of injustices that surrounded her; she knew that she needed to be "on the side of the workers and not with the comfortable people" (qtd. in Garrison 61). Although Vorse was born

into the class of “comfortable people,” she believed that their indifference, like hers, was only naiveté. Vorse felt that her radical journalism and her maternal-based activism could enlighten those who did not understand how the most basic comforts of human survival were denied to working-class women and children.

In their first year of marriage, Vorse and O’Brien continued to actively work for the cause of labor. After only three years of marriage, O’Brien fell ill with stomach cancer and died in 1915. Once again, the weight of the roles of mother and breadwinner fell upon Vorse (Garrison, *Mary* 99). By this time, Vorse was in her mid-thirties and had three small children; yet, she had emerged as leader among radical journalists. Vorse’s working-class enlightenment arose from her maternal identification with the working mothers of New York who unwittingly fed their babies contaminated milk, from the immigrant women of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company who were struggling to feed and clothe their children, the mothers in Lawrence who just wanted to save their children from the hunger and violence, and her own desperate struggle to support herself and her children as a freelance journalist.

Socially Conscious Plot and Maternal Plight

The first chapter of Vorse’s *Strike!* establishes three points of view through the observations and experiences of three distinct classes of characters: the union leaders who organize demonstrations of resistance, the journalists who report the events, and Mamie Lewes who represents the material reality as well as the militancy of the millworkers. Hapke notes that Vorse’s attempt to “meld men’s and women’s experiences, male strategists and female rank and file” contributes to the novel’s flawed fragmented structure by alternating gendered experiences “at thirty-page intervals” (157). Although the portrayal of male and female involvement appears fragmented or divisive with regard to a formal plot or a singular protagonist, Vorse’s intervals

reflect a structural technique that illuminates the development of the class consciousness of an entire collective.

Class consciousness in a collective novel, as Foley attests, “consists in the development of a new, more collective self, one that acquires identity through acknowledging rather than denying its multiple extensions into others” (237). In alternating between the multiple and gendered experiences within a singular historical event, Vorse’s collective novel depicts realistic, and perhaps more palatable identities, within a traditional division of labor. Vorse’s readers were comfortable middle-class people who could accept the need of a mother to work outside the home, but accepting a militant working mother went against the grain of Southern tradition. Yet, through the gendered intervals of factual reporting, Northern union organizers strategizing, and maternal activists picketing, the naiveté of the middle-class comfortable people is dispelled and social consciousness emerges as part of a natural societal order. Vorse’s experience on the Milk Committee in New York proved that economically comfortable people understood the need to provide milk for infants. Consequently, Vorse foregrounds the militancy of the collective as a model of maternal activism that invokes and revises the glorification of domesticity and motherhood to draw the sympathy of the comfortable people as well as to inspire solidarity among both the female and the male members of the working-class collective.

When Vorse’s young reporter, Roger Hewlett, first arrives to cover the strike in Stonerton, he seeks out the location of a union rally where he expects to interview Fer Deane, the fictionalized Communist leader, Fred Beal. However, Hewlett’s first interview at the “speaking” event is with Mamie Lewes, who emerges as the unifying character among the female millworkers. Lewes’ testimony reveals the effects of long hours and low wages upon female strikers and also presents an abbreviated biography of Ella May Wiggins. Vorse closes the

chapter with a brief interval that offers an insight to the struggles of the union organizers. Fer Deane admits his alienation and suggests the workers “would do a lot better if they had a southern feller for their leader.” Deane states, “[t]hey like me but I don’t belong to them” (12). Deane’s confession implies that as a Northerner, he falls short of understanding his rank and file because he cannot identify with the regional and cultural experiences of the southern millworkers.

Significantly couched between Hewlett’s introductory arrival and his interview with an alienated strike leader, is Hewlett’s unofficial interview with a southern woman who meets all but one of Deane’s qualifications: gender. In her introduction to her fictional Wiggins, Vorse posits Mamie Lewes as a maternal voice of authority who belongs to the working-class and enlightens a naïve Hewlett to the plight of mill working mother through the course of his informal interview. Where the character of Deane, similar to the real-life Beal, is consistently absent from picketing demonstrations, Vorse’s narrative establishes the presence of Lewes as the voice of the southern working-class collective.

After settling into his hotel and locating the union rally, Hewlett notices Lewes in the audience and notes that she appears poor enough to be a mill worker but seems to distinguish herself through her enthusiasm. Hewlett initiates a conversation with “a short curly haired woman dressed in poor clothes, but there was something about her that was alert and gay and extremely alive.” He asks if she has joined the union and Lewes responds, “No, I ain’t jined up yet, but I’m a goin’ to” (5). Lewes explains how maternal responsibility conflicts with her professional goals and that between working long hours at the mill and tending to her children, she doesn’t have time to get to the union headquarters before the office closes.

After discovering that Lewes has four children and lives with her kin in a two-room shack almost two miles away, Hewlett also learns that Lewes earns “only eight dollars and forty cents a week” and “cain’t even afford to git a house on the mill hill” (6). The real-life Wiggins already joined the union and served as union secretary by the time Vorse had arrived in Gastonia (Hall, et al. 227). However, Vorse alters this historical fact to depict how the promise of union solidarity drew its membership from the southern millworkers. Vorse’s fictional maternal narrative echoes Wiggins’ historical last words to Vorse and justifies union membership as a viable solution for working-class oppression. Vorse illuminates the workers’ belief that the union would help them to improve working and living conditions as opposed to the middle-class perceptions that the workers joined the union as the result of a political decision to become Communist revolutionaries.

Unlike the other female Gastonia novelists, Vorse avoided any formal political affiliation with organized labor or with the Communist Party. However, Vorse’s reportage of strikes also extended to her participation in labor politics through organizing, picketing, and advocating union solidarity. More notably, Vorse had worked with her good friend, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, as a co-leader in organizing the workers on the Mesabi Range strike of 1916. The union recruitment of Lewes in *Strike!* not only illuminates Vorse’s union advocacy, but also plays out in the novel as the recruitment of Hewlett into a working-class collective of labor journalists.

Hewlett’s interview with Lewes also reveals how the mill manipulates workers through a system of reward or punishment through the assignment of shift work. Many mills permitted female workers to take the evening shifts while their spouses worked the day shifts so that they could be at home with their children. When Hewlett asks Lewes if she works nights, Lewes continues her maternal testimony with “I couldn’t git to work nights. I had eight children and

they took sick with diphthery. I cried and begged for that sup'intendent to let me work nights so's I could stay home and take keer o' the children daytimes, but he wouldn't me go. . . . Four o' my children died." Lewes voices her resentment at not being assigned an evening shift when she requests the assignment and declares the superintendent to be "the sorriest man in the world" (6). Hewlett's question implies his understanding of the management's past practice as a legitimate request. Lewes' testimony suggests that the superintendent's denial of any maternal consideration is an intentional act of cruelty directed toward Lewes and represents mill management's abuse of the collective.

Vorse also suggests that the superintendent's denial of a night shift contributed to the destruction of Lewes' marriage. Lewes sympathetically explains that her husband, Wil, abandoned her and her children because he "got all discouraged like, havin' the chillen die. Plum did take his ambition away. He went off to another town to git work and I never did yeah from him no mo'" (6). Through Lewes' lack of bitterness, Vorse emphasizes how poverty affects the male millworkers' perception of their traditional roles as providers. Moreover, Vorse's own experience attests to the disastrous effects upon her first marriage when her success as a writer overshadowed that of her husband's. In Vorse's biography, Garrison notes that in two separate articles, "Working Mother" and "Failure," Vorse wrote: "Not many men will forgive their wives for supporting them" (qtd. in *Mary* 33).

Lewes concludes her maternal testimony with her concern for her children's education, "My little girl, she's eleven, and she heps me right smart. Don't none of my chillen git to school. How could they? I wouldn't have no one to leave the little ones with, and ef I could, how would I git clothen and shoes for 'em?" (6). Lewes testimony, again, reflects Ella May's lived reality where her eleven-year old daughter, Myrtle, tends her four younger siblings whose ages ranged

from eight years to thirteen months (Salmond 129). Myrtle Wiggins and her siblings also reflect the reality of the millworkers' children whose lack of education and opportunity perpetuated the poverty of the mill worker and guaranteed the mill's supply of cheap and contented labor.

Hewlett offers no answer to Lewes' question of how to supply something as basic as clothing and shoes as the fictional Wiggins "drifted away in the crowd" (6). Vorse shifts her reporter's attention toward the organizers, leaving the Lewes interview open-ended with the answers to Lewes' questions left in the hands of the comfortable people who read her novel.

Maternal Veil of Ignorance

In her second chapter, Vorse introduces economically comfortable people as reproductive bodies that reproduce class oppression. Drawing a sharp contrast to the interview with Lewes, Hewlett stops briefly to chat with friends of his family who also live in Stonerton. Vorse depicts a veil of ignorance skewing the perceptions of the middle-class comfortable people through the maternal body of Mrs. Parker and her daughter, Jean. Similar to her own experience in growing up in an upper-class environment and developing a class consciousness through her reportage, Vorse links Hewlett's ignorance with a maternal class inheritance. Vorse introduces the Parker women as friends of Hewlett's mother. Young Hewlett remembers the shared vacations with the Parkers in the North East. The reporter's escape to the home of family friends appears to provide a brief respite for Hewlett who is initially overwhelmed by the harsh realities in Gastonia. However, Hewlett's visit to the Parker's home illuminates a place of class ignorance within himself and within the Parkers.

In contrast to the shack shared by Ella May Wiggins and her daughter, Mrs. Parker and her daughter live on a street of "pleasant houses" Hewlett remarks that he is "back in a familiar comprehensive world" (17). For Hewlett, comprehensive meant a familiar place outside of the desperate world of the millworkers, where his inclusion in the world of middle class comfort

makes sense. Vorse jars Hewlett's sense of escape with a dose of class-consciousness and reveals the malignancy of class ignorance through the naïve exaggerations and oversimplifications of a mother and daughter who represent "the grace and manner that people identify with the South" (17). The feminine perceptions of the Parker women draw upon the southern tradition of womanhood. The image of a southern lady, according to Ann Goodwyn Jones, is a representation of "her culture's idea of religious, moral, sexual, racial, and social perfection" (9). Jones also asserts that the idealized virtue of southern womanhood is perpetuated through female ignorance where a woman's "goodness depends directly on innocence—in fact, on ignorance of evil" (9). Mrs. Parker and her daughter represent Jones' model of a southern lady whose perceived goodness depends upon what she reads in the newspapers and hears through the town's gossip.

As the Parker women chat with Hewlett, they not only reveal their ignorance of evil, but they also reveal how they perpetuate the paternalistic system that oppresses the millworkers. According to Jean and her mother The absentee mill owner, Mr. Schenk represents a man of southern honor, as well as an economic savior who "bettered" the conditions of the ignorant mountain people who "came from their mud-floored cabins" (18). Mrs. Parker claims, "We have never had any trouble with our workers. . . . They are far better off than when they left the mountains" (19). Mrs. Parker's comments mimic the antebellum justification of slave ownership, as well as the separation of a class with "our workers." Mrs. Parker notes the generosity of Mr. Schenk who provides "nice houses with electric light free. And lots of them have baths." Mrs. Parker's daughter immediately interjects that the families "never use the baths" because "[t]hey just use them to keep things in"(19). Ironically, the Parkers are revealing the facts as they naively understand them. They have no idea of the amount of rent Mr. Schenk charges the workers to

live in these nice houses or the mitigating circumstances that require the millworkers to use bath tubs as additional sleeping arrangements in an overcrowded mill house.

Mrs. Parker also invokes a flawed economic comparison between a mountain family and an unnamed college-educated cousin. Despite the thousands of dollars spent on a college degree and study abroad, Mrs. Parker laments that Jean's cousin only earns forty dollars a week. Mrs. Parker highlights the economic injustice as she explains, "Take a family of four mountain people, each making eighteen-fifty a week, and that gives them an income of seventy-four dollars a week" (18). Mrs. Parker's flawed statistic suggests a class entitlement and implies that a mountain family's income is almost twice that of the poor Parker cousin's income. Mrs. Parker not only reports an inflated salary level, but she also compares the wages of one worker to the wages of four workers. Ensnared within their own naiveté, the Parkers fail to comprehend that even in the most ideal of situations, a mountain family of four would still be comprised of a mother, a father, and two children working in the mill, which would deny the children the educational opportunities available to the Parker's cousin.

As Hewlett questions the women's wage estimates, the women respond with additional evidence to validate their perception of how the millworkers selfishly spend their high wages by consuming the choicest products from the local farmers. Mrs. Parker posits conspicuous grocery consumption with, "Oh, lots of them are making much more, my dear boy. Why, the time when farmers with eggs and vegetables and chickens used to drive up to the house all the time to sell things. Now they never get past the mill village. The mill village buys up everything" (18). The Parker's resentment is rooted within basic human survival in a competition for eggs, vegetables, and chickens. Hewlett recognizes that the epitome of resentment is rooted in real life – within the Parker's home. Through her objective reporter's two short interviews, Vorse documents class

contradiction between the lives of the Parker women and those of Mamie Lewes and her children.

Sitting in a comfortable parlor with two women, Hewlett makes a startling discovery about class warfare: “Here was where the hate came from. . . . Here was the home of the Mob. The comfortable people, the well-fixed people of Stonerton felt fury and outrage at the mill hands’ revolt. . . . Hate and Mob were a multiplication of the Parkers” (19-21). Through his reproductive rhetoric, Hewlett creates an originary myth that implies that class hatred and mob rule are not only reproduced through the Parker women, but also reproduced within himself through his maternal inheritance. The individual identities of the Parker women and Hewlett’s unnamed mother are replaced by a unifying collective maternal identity that not only reproduces a class, but whose veil of ignorance contributes to the reproduction of class oppression. Hewlett, like the Parkers and others of their class has not experienced economic discomfort, and his recognition of his own ignorance is the first step toward class consciousness. Moreover, in *Strike!* Vorse attempts to shift the consciousness of her economically comfortable readers through her characterizations of the Parkers as a maternal ideal grounded in a tradition of ignorance resulting in the exploitation of the working-class.

Maternal Ballads of Union Solidarity

The day after his interview with the Parkers, Hewlett witnesses his first working-class demonstration of resistance with the picketing of the Manville-Jenkes Mill. Vorse relies upon the narratives of her reporters, Hewlett and Hoskins, to project a voice of social consciousness and to reveal the maternal-based activism as the legitimate motive for working-class resistance. In aligning the observations of Hewlett with Hoskins with the narratives of Lewes, Vorse foregrounds the experiences of the working-class collective and its desire for a better life for the children. The collective “workers’ parade” in Stonerton is described by Hoskins and Hewlett as a

scene of solidarity and maternal activism: “Here were people, men and women and children walking together, rank on rank of young millworkers walking along bearing banners that read ‘we want schools.’ . . . There were smaller children marched with banners—‘Must we go to the mill?’” (26). The banners reflect the common goal of the collective as concern for the children, but the observations of the reporters lend credibility to the messages on the banners by creating a vivid image of maternal-based solidarity for a skeptical readership.

Vorse also depicts the emotional connection between the journalists by narrating Hewlett’s response: “he felt unexpectedly moved. He wasn’t ashamed to say as much to Hoskins.” Hoskins then responds, “they get me too. I can’t help remembering they’re the docile one-hundred per cent Americans. . . . [T]hey’ve been docile and one-hundred-per cent so long” (26). Vorse suggests that the reporters are emotionally “moved” because they personally identify with the workers and their children as Americans like themselves. The shared identity of the reporters with the southern mill worker invokes both a paternal and a patriotic unity that differs from the emotional affiliation with the labor demonstrations of the North where the strikers were immigrant workers. Vorse also emphasizes the industrialization of the South as built upon the backs of the southern working-class who also share a historical sense of regional affiliation.

Vorse moves from the observations of the sympathetic reporters to depicting the developing social consciousness of Lewes. Lewes’ reflective observations shift from a sense of isolation to a sense of collective affiliation and purpose:

She had lived alone and isolated. She made so little since her husband left that she couldn’t even live on the mill hill. She knew few people. Now she was part of something—she was part of the parade. Yesterday she had joined the Union . . . She felt part of the crowd. They were all keeping time to one thing. They were all absorbed in something bigger than they were—something that brought them all together and merged them in something outside themselves. I reckon this is the solidarity that they’s always talkin’ about, thought Mamie Lewes, feeling she had made a valuable and novel discovery. (27)

Until the working-class demonstration of solidarity, Lewes and her co-workers passively accepted their wages and conditions because they were silenced by their isolation and vulnerability. Entirely dependent upon a patriarchal system of exploitation, workers feared for their livelihood and could not risk voicing their singular resistance. However, Lewes' affiliation with a "parade" shifts her perception as an individual voice toward "something bigger" – a powerful collective voice against social injustice. However, Vorse contrasts Lewes' discovery of solidarity with the prevailing opinion of the middle-class people. According to Hoskins, "Americans don't understand the philosophy of demonstration"(27). Rocks are thrown, a fight breaks out, and the governor calls in the militia. While the power of demonstration of a large organized contingent of union members appears to be a genuine threat to the economically comfortable Americans, for Mamie Lewes, the right of the collective represents the power to resist an oppressive patriarchal tradition.

Despite the presence of the militia the next day, Lewes leaves her children at home and joins the picket line to prevent scabs from entering the mill. When a union leader asks if she could leave her children, Lewes answers, "reckon ef I kin leave 'em to work I kin leave 'em to picket" (35). Vorse illuminates part of her own personal conflict between wage work and mother work through Lewes' comment. The parallel of Lewes' responsibility to the union and her responsibility to her children also mirrors the concerns of many who, according to Vorse, are "the mothers of small children [who] have to work at night to keep their families in food and necessities" (47). As the only breadwinner, Lewes' commitment for better wages is a commitment to the survival of her family. Vorse illustrates how a woman's sense of commitment to her family is inseparable from her commitment to her work. At the same time, the conflict between picketing and child care also reflects Vorse's own sense of "double failure" and the

compromises needed for her to leave her children to report labor uprisings across the United States.

Although Lewes experiences her revelation of solidarity at the first picket parade, Vorse draws upon the solidarity among women to further Lewes' understanding of collective identity and dedication to the union. Before appearing on the platform at union meetings, Lewes writes and sings her ballads while she is working at the relief store with other women who are distributing food staples such as corn meal and lard to the families of the strikers. Lewes rises to the union platform to sing only after Old Ma Gilfillin assures her, "Weall admires fer to hear you sing your song-ballits" (52). Ma Gilfillin's assurances convince Lewes that she is part of the maternal collective and her voice is a viable part of the union voice.

To emphasize Lewes' sense of maternal solidarity, Vorse, like the other three female Gastonia novelists, draws upon the voice of Ella May Wiggins and the lyrics of her powerful ballad, "Mill Mother's Lament." Written in first person plural, "Mill Mother's Lament" affirms Wiggins' commitment to the union and to maternal-based activism. Vorse reproduces four of the six stanzas within her novel to illustrate how Lewes' is an integral part of a female collective and to invoke the power of maternal tradition as a means of evoking the sympathies of the middle-class comfortable people who subscribe to the paternal tradition of southern womanhood. Lewes stands on the union platform and sings "easily and without effort" at the union rally: "We leave our homes in the morning,/We kiss our children good-by/While we slave for our bosses,/Our children scream and cry. . . ./It is for our little children/That seem to us so dear,/But for us nor them, oh, workers, the bosses do not keer" (53). Invoking maternal tradition, Wiggins' ballad employs the plural "we," which represents a biological unity of women, as well as the paternal responsibility of men and implies a maternal-based solidarity. Lewes' comfort in singing before

a crowd from the union platform also suggests the developing social consciousness of the female millworkers as maternal activists in, “it is for our children.” The ballad emphasizes the shared responsibility of the collective for taking care of “our” children implying a moral and social obligation for both women and men to care for the small and helpless.

Vorse affirms how Lewes’ ballad inspires a unified response: “It was their own story, put in incredibly simple terms. Every one had lived through this. There was no piece of sentiment; it was the history of every one there put into song” (53). The response of the collective reveals a sense of maternal solidarity for “every one” in the all-inclusive lyrics of Wiggins’ ballad. Vorse implies a collective identity through shared experiences reflected in “their own story” and suggests that “every one there” at the union rally identifies with the struggle for subsistence survival and a mother’s concern for her “dear little children” who suffer from capitalist exploitation. The “Mill Mother’s Lament” highlights the social injustices inflicted by the comfortable people through the depiction of the children of the millworkers and justifies the resistance of the working-class through maternal activism.

Maternal Muse of Militancy

Although Lewes’ ballads inspire maternal solidarity within the collective, the character of Lewes resists the heroic identity as the muse of the millworkers. Rather, Lewes’ view of the union as her muse implies that the lyrics of her ballads are a reflection of a collective voice. Lewes claims “[t]he songs just seem to come to me now that the union came” (166). The arrival of the union also coincides with the arrival of Lewes’ social consciousness and the recognition of Lewes’ as dedicated to union solidarity. The reporters comment upon Lewes’ dedication and note that the scabs continue to return to the mill instead of maintaining the strike. The scabs excuse their actions with maternal concerns claiming that “sickness in the family and a new baby” force them to violate the picket line. Hoskins claims the scabs don’t understand the

meaning of solidarity and states, “these folks here haven’t got it yet.” Hoskins clarifies his definition of solidarity as “that real heart of it, that ‘all for one and one for all’.” However, Hewlett contends that Mamie Lewes “certainly got it” (109). With Hewlett as her witness, Lewes’ ballad writing, relief work, picketing, and militant resistance plays out in the novel as heart-felt acts of union solidarity inspired by a commitment to the union’s maternal collective.

In addition to her portrayal of female militancy within the maternal collective, Vorse also depicts union solidarity through maternal care taking. Although Lewes escapes much of the physical brutality that inflicted upon Vorse’s other characters, Lewes is ever-present sharing in the operation of the relief store, rushing to the aid of the wounded and the evicted, and helping in the packing over three hundred homeless strikers into make-shift “homes” in a tent city. Vorse’s portrayal of Lewes counters the perceptions of the middle-class who believe the union challenges the southern tradition of white supremacy; represents anarchists, Communists, Bolsheviks and socialists who promote free love; and wants to “kill people and incidentally destroy the State and industry” (Vorse 153-158). Vorse depicts the heart of militancy as the heart of a maternal caretaker who is dedicated to peaceful demonstration for social justice.

In response to their fears, the comfortable people reinforce their police force by forming, the Committee of One-Hundred, a vigilante group to defend American decency. Vorse documents the terror of this organization through vivid descriptions of their attacks upon the maternal bodies in the break up of picket marches and the destruction of the relief store and tent city. Vorse depicts each brutal incident with children screaming and crying in the background and women being beaten, choked, and blackjacked. After the raid of the Committee of One Hundred on the strikers’ tent city, seventy-two females along with nine males are arrested and charged with the murder of Chief Humphries, the fictionalized Chief O.F. Aderholt. The number

of females arrested in Vorse's fictional portrayal affirms the historical reality of a militant collective that consisted largely of female activists. Although the women are released in Gastonia, as well as in Vorse's Stonerton, the judge's declaration of a mistrial leads Committee of One Hundred, once again, down a path of brutal revenge upon the maternal activists that results in the murder of the union's ballad singer.

Vorse alters the historical events surrounding the murder of her fictionalized Wiggins to emphasize her portrayal of Lewes as the core of a female collective whose death highlights the maternal-based activism as the motive behind the strikers' militancy. Vorse foreshadows the murder through the character of Dewey Bryson, a weaver and local union organizer who appears as Lewes' love interest, who "got up Saturday with a feeling of execution. A death house feeling" (201). En route to the meeting, Bryson and a group of strikers are delayed in Stonerton by a confrontation with the mob and by the time they arrive in Tesner, the rally had already been broken up by vigilantes. As Lane notes, Lewes' murder occurs during a union rally as a singular event as opposed to the actual historical event during which Wiggins was shot en route to the rally (86). With Bryson delayed and no other union leaders are present at the event, Vorse places Lewes in a union leadership position.

The absence of the organizers foregrounds the maternal presence of Lewes, whose ballads, to this point, had consistently followed the oratory of the male leadership. Vorse locates the event in Tesner, rather than Stonerton, where Lewes worked and lived, suggesting the geographical expansion of the strike and positioning Lewes as calling forth the membership to hear her message of solidarity. Bryson confirms Lewes' presence as central to the rally through her taunting lyrics: "Come all ye scabs ef you want to year/The story of a mean millionare /Basil Schenk is that millionare's name—" (201). Lewes' message is cut off when Bryson and

the vigilantes arrive at the same time and the millworkers flee in fear. Lewes stands on the back of a truck, along with other departing millworkers, and confirms her attempt to hold the rally telling Bryson, “We tried to hold [the rally] ennyway, Dewey.” Lewes then completes the ballad that had signaled the event with the last line of her lyrics: “*He cain’t buy the Union with his money and frame!*” (author’s emphasis 202). The song that depicts the end of the event where the collective has gathered also represents the end of Lewes’ life. A report of gunshot follows and Lewes collapses and utters her final words, “Oh Lawdy, they’ve hit me.” Bryson confirms the death of the ballad singer screaming, “Mamie Lewes! She’s daid! Mamie Lewes is daid!” As Bryson helps to carry Lewes’ body to a neighboring house, the death of union solidarity pervades his every thought: “‘It’s over!’ he thought. ‘It’s over!’ . . . She and her ‘song ballits’ had been the very core of the strike” (202). Bryson confirms that Lewes is the “core” of the collective and her death occurs as an act of maternal activism in the presence of her maternal collective. Bryson’s testimony extends beyond that of a grieving lover to a grieving comrade who recognizes the heart of the maternal resistance has literally and figuratively stopped beating.

Vorse’s depiction of Lewes’ funeral mirrors the funeral of Wiggins. In addition to the attendance of Lewes’ children, family, and co-workers at Lewes’ funeral, Vorse’s narrative confirms with historical accuracy that reporters from “[a]ll the big metropolitan newspapers” appeared with photographers who took “pictures [that] would go to workers all over the country, and all over the world.” Vorse ends the rituals with the voice of a mill worker from Tesner who offered Lewes’ ballad to the workers of world and sang, “How it grieves the heart of a mother!” (204). In her final hour, Lewes emerges as a world renowned “mill mother” whose lament led her to a core position of leadership where she gave her life for cause of the maternal collective.

Vorse's documentation of the arrests and trials in Stonerton reflect the same futility of the arrests and trials in Gastonia; No one was prosecuted for the murder of the ballad singer. Yet, in the final thirty pages of *Strike!*, Vorse portrays the historical repercussions when the murder of Wiggins at Gastonia sparked widespread demonstrations among the millworkers within the Piedmont region. The final strike of Vorse's fictional Stonerton memorializes Lewes, as well as the participation of the female collective who gather together in maternal solidarity in another tragic demonstration that claims the life of Fer Deane and four male strikers.

Despite the death of Lewes, the fictional mill owners, like the real mill owners, still did not keep their promises. Vorse reveals the impact on the six female and two male workers: "There was discrimination. Ma Gilfillin and Daisy West could get no work. Nor could Jolas or Binney nor any other of the Jolas girls" (215). In a report to Fer Deane, a striker notes the readiness of the millworkers for another picketing demonstration: "When Mamie Lewes wuz shot, we all tuk an oath we'd not rest till we'd got 'em out ag'in. . . . The women's ben takin' a part. Mis' Cuthbert and some of the Trent wives ha' ben organizing right smart amongst the women (213). The mill worker invokes Lewes as the maternal martyr who motivates more women to take an even more militant role in resistance. Moreover, the death of Lewes inspires women to make a sacred pact to unite and resist as a memorial from the heart of the maternal collective.

The final strike results in the deaths of Fer Deane and five male millworkers, as well as the death of the resistance of the maternal collective. John M. Reilly argues that in her historical alteration of the fate of the fictionalized Beal, Vorse martyrs Deane rather than revealing Beal's defection to Russia (153-154). Reilly's comment suggests that the martyrdom of Deane overshadows the martyrdom of Lewes and the participation of a female collective. Vorse's fictional alteration of shared union martyrdom, however, supports her portrayal of the multiple

and gendered experiences of the collective and emphasizes the significant participation of female activists. The shooting of the male millworkers and the funeral scene following the death of Wiggins are taken from another workers' demonstration in Marion, outside of Gastonia. Beal's fate depicts a final act of solidarity among union brotherhood and the subsequent end of the story.

Conversely, the death of Lewes symbolizes the death of a maternal martyr who inspires the militancy of the entire collective. Lewes is not only the first to die a martyr's death, but her death inspires Deane to join the picketing workers in their final demonstration of resistance.

Throughout the novel, Deane, fearing assassination, hides safely in his room, as well as in neighboring towns, leaving the organizing of the demonstrations to his assistant, Irma Rankin, Vorse's fictionalized Vera Buch Weisbord. Joseph Urgo suggests that Rankin's name is a play on words implying "rank and file" (69). Reading Rankin from a maternal lens, her gendered role aligns her with Lewes, as well as with the other female strikers and relief workers whose positions as "rank and file" were the real backbone of the strike. Lewes unites the rank and file to represent a collective whose maternal activism sustained a militant working-class resistance.

In *Strike!* Lewes is immortalized as a maternal whose death inspires the radical conversion of Vorse's young naïve reporter to a working-class consciousness. Del Evans, a mill worker from Stonerton, tells Hewlett, "We're agoin' to bring solidarity to the whole South. We cai't lose no time. . . . so's they all, an' Mamie Lewes too, won't have died fer nothin'" (235). Vorse narrates Hewlett's epiphany as a heart-felt affiliation to reporting for the union's cause: "And he had to go on too. He had lost his own class; he could never belong in their class of workers. He was without country now, and yet wherever they went, what ever their destination might be, he had to go with them" (235-236). Roger Hewlett's conversion reflects Vorse's own life's journey.

Inspired by Wiggins and “almost every working woman,” who balanced work and family, Vorse also had to “go on” as a labor journalist from Lawrence, to New York, to Philadelphia, to Passaic, and to wherever there was a “spontaneous uprising” of workers. Vorse’s *Strike!* not only reveals maternal solidarity as the heart of collective human experience through her fictional portrayal of Ella May Wiggins, but she also delivers a message of maternal-based activism to the comfortable people.

CHAPTER 3
GRACE LUMPKIN: LABORING WOMEN AND THE POLITICS OF LABOR IN *TO MAKE MY BREAD*

Mother Work and Mill Work

In reporting the murder of Ella May Wiggins in the 1929 textile mill strike in Gastonia, North Carolina's *News and Observer* linked the union-organizing activism of Wiggins with her maternal need to supply bread for her hungry children. The summary lead read: "The state of North Carolina stands shamed and disgraced by this inhuman crime...The humble woman sought to improve the conditions under which she worked sixty hours a week to find bread for her five children" (qtd. in Salmond 129). Where most of the newspaper reports questioned Wiggins' "morality" as a single mother, the lead of the *News and Observer* evoked a sense of shame from the entire political body of the state of North Carolina. The report of *News and Observer* emphasized the inhumanity of murdering a woman whose labor was measured in both her wage-earning hours at the mill and in her maternal responsibility for the care of her children. Although the motive for the murder was never clearly established, Wiggins' death legitimized working-class protest by inspiring a social consciousness across class distinctions, not only in North Carolina but across the United States.

In *To Make My Bread* Grace Lumpkin moves her readers to a working-class sympathy by recreating the life and the death of Ella May Wiggins through two generations of women who labor in mother work and mill work. Lumpkin's fictional Wiggins, Bonnie McClure, and her mother, Emma McClure, portray the experiences of women who left rural privation in the Carolina mountains to work in the mill villages. Through her female protagonists, Lumpkin articulates a revolutionary model of maternal-based activism where the nurturing and caretaking of a woman's family in the rural Appalachian Mountains extends into mills and inspires a model of working-class solidarity.

By the time Lumpkin was writing *To Make My Bread*, she was a loyal member of the Communist Party. Like many revolutionary writers in the 1920s and 1930s, Lumpkin believed that the party offered a cure for the social and economic ills that plagued the United States; she also believed that she could be a part of the “artistic intervention” that could help to spread hope to the working-class (Sowinska vii). This chapter briefly addresses how Lumpkin’s personal and political experiences inform her revolutionary writing. The balance of the chapter focuses on Lumpkin’s fictional recreation of Ella May Wiggins as a maternal representation of two generations of women who left the rural mountains to work in the Carolina cotton mills. In *To Make My Bread*, Lumpkin recreates her fictional Gastonia and depicts a revolutionary model of maternal-based activism through a mother and daughter, Emma and Bonnie McClure.

The first half of the novel traces a widowed Emma McClure’s struggle to take care of her daughter, Bonnie; her three sons; and her aging father in a small rural farming community in Southern Appalachia. Lumpkin’s narrative reflects the experiences of most women in the Piedmont Region who, out of economic desperation, were forced to abandon their rural farm life and seek work in the mills. The novel opens with an unseasonable spring blizzard and Emma birthing her youngest son, John. Isolated from her female community, Emma relies upon her father to assist in her delivery. The newborn is placed in the cradle with an infant Bonnie, Lumpkin’s fictionalized representation of Wiggins. The cradle sharing links Bonnie and John in a parallel childhood as well as political development. By the time Bonnie is thirteen, her mother will have taken in an unwed mother into their already crowded cabin, her grandfather will have been arrested for bootlegging, one older brother will have been murdered, and the eldest brother will have sold the family farm to a lumbering company and abandoned the family entirely. Out

of desperation Emma is forced to pack up her two youngest children and her aging father, join the family of her husband's brother, and seek work at the Wentworth Mill.

The second half of Lumpkin's novel focuses on the experiences of the McClures, who discover that the mill offers no respite from poverty. When Emma is stricken with pellagra and can no longer work at the mill, Bonnie and her younger brother, John, begin working so the family can remain in mill housing. Along with their adolescent development, Lumpkin traces the development of Bonnie and John's social consciousness. While her brother's union militancy occurs soon after his employment, Bonnie marries; like the real-life Wiggins, her labor is interrupted by yearly childbirth. After her mother, husband, and daughter die of malnutrition and lack of medical care, Bonnie joins John in advocating for the union cause. Speaking for herself as well as for the other mill-working women, Bonnie composes maternal ballads that invoke motherhood as a social responsibility. Just as she steps up to the podium with her mother-millworker message, Bonnie is shot and killed leaving John to carry on the message of union solidarity.

A Mill Writer's Artistic Intervention

Living most of her life in rural South where the cotton mill industry had firmly established itself since the 1880s, Lumpkin witnessed the effects of long hours and low wages on the millworkers. Born in Georgia in 1892, Lumpkin was the ninth of eleven children in a family that clung to their religion and their southern Confederate identity. Although the Lumpkins were better off than most of their neighbors, they felt the economic impact of Reconstruction after the Civil War, and Lumpkin's father moved the family from Georgia to South Carolina in the hope of economic recovery. Lumpkin attended school with the children of sharecroppers, whose poverty was far below that of the Lumpkins. When her father died in 1910, the family was left destitute and Lumpkin borrowed money to attend college. She completed a two-year certification

program in one year and began her teaching career in Georgia and later, South Carolina.

Historically, Lumpkin's college experience reflects a time in the early 1920s when progressive reformists focused on adult education as a means of societal reform (Heller 214). In running a school that offered evening adult education for the farming families of Southern Appalachia and working for the federal government as a home demonstrator, Lumpkin combined her belief in adult education with her social consciousness and actively sought solutions for the rural poor. Sylvia Cook notes that Lumpkin spent summers in the mountains of North Carolina staying with families who worked in the cotton mills (52). The relationship between Lumpkin as the mill writer and the mountain families as millworkers is one of historical experience and a socially conscious sense of shared identity born of economic struggle.

Lumpkin's political consciousness also led her to work for a year for the YWCA in France with an organization for French working girls. After Lumpkin returned to the family home, she worked for the YWCA in South Carolina. During this time she realized that "the workers could only better their lives by means of unions" (qtd in Sowinska x). Following the death of her mother, Lumpkin pursued her career in New York City in 1925 writing for a "pacifist and mildly socialist" publication, *The World Tomorrow*. The sparks of Lumpkin's proletarian conversion were ignited when she covered the first Communist-led strike in Passaic, New Jersey, in 1926. While in Passaic, Lumpkin first met the man who would become her lover and husband, Michael Intrator, who was a member of the Communist Party during this period. During the picket sponsored by the Sacco and Vanzetti Defense Committee in 1927, Lumpkin was arrested with other members of the party.

By the late 1920s Lumpkin was an ardently committed Communist "scoundrel" and joined the writing staff of *The New Masses*. Lumpkin was sent South by the party to investigate

lynchings, help organize the African American sharecroppers, and participate in the Communist-led resistance in the Piedmont region of the Southern Appalachian Mountains at Gastonia.

Lumpkin was instrumental in bringing race relations and the need for interracial solidarity to the forefront of the Communist Party's agenda. (Sowinska xi-xxi). *To Make My Bread* emerged from Lumpkin's leftist loyalties winning the praises of the Communist Party as well as the 1932 Gorky Prize as best labor novel of the year (Salmond 188).

Although Lumpkin's experience with the Communist Party inspires a story of maternal solidarity, her break with the party reveals another maternal-based story in which Lumpkin aborts the pregnancy that resulted from her relationship with Michael Intrator and sinks into a life of rural isolation. Although the leftist ideology had inspired her prize-winning novel, her conservative southern religious upbringing, which she portrays as the moral conscience in her novel, imposed its own death sentence upon Lumpkin's creativity as a revolutionary writer.

In New York Lumpkin and Intrator scandalized their neighbors by sharing an apartment with Esther Shemitz and Whitaker Chambers. The defections of Intrator and Chambers from the Communist Party created animosity among Lumpkin's friends, who chose to separate themselves from the factionalist politics of the party. By the late 1930s, feeling abandoned by her friends, Lumpkin sought an abortion and left Intrator. No one can guess whether Lumpkin's defection from the Communist Party was prompted by her own sense of shame brought on by her abortion, the defections of Intrator and Chambers, or the pressure of the Chambers-Hiss espionage and perjury trials. Lumpkin reconstructed various versions of her involvement with the party during her testimony before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. Despite the conflicting evidence, history records Lumpkin's intellectual and political struggles as a catalyst to her most creative period as a writer, or what Lumpkin herself refers to as her "Communist Phase"

(Sowinska xviii-xx). Lumpkin's novel stands as testimony to a woman's life when love, pregnancy, and an intellectual struggle for a shared sense of identity inspire a working-class social consciousness. Armed with first-hand experience of the plight of the southern rural poor, liberal Leftist philosophies, and her own maternal experience, Lumpkin not only reported women's historical place on the picket lines, but she also crossed the boundary lines of gender and race to tell a story of a maternal-based working-class solidarity.

Mountain Myth and Material Reality

Lumpkin devotes the first half of *To Make My Bread* to establishing the interrelationship of a mother and daughter, Emma and Bonnie McClure, and how they function in a cooperative female community as a basis for survival in an environment where males are either absent or ineffectual. In the second half of the novel, Lumpkin maintains the cooperative interrelationship of the mill families as a maternal extension of a communal class consciousness. For generations of pioneering farm families, worker solidarity, was understood as the shared labor of all family members who lived and worked on the family farm. Larger families were an advantage in that many hands shared in the planting and harvesting; thus, the yearly pregnancy experienced by so many women was a source of pride in producing more hands for working the farm. southern rural women were also socialized to assume a sense of social obligation to other women in their community by supporting each other during births and deaths. When families migrated from the mountains to the mills, their interdependent kin relationships then translated as multi-layered, deeply felt relationships of solidarity with other millworkers.

Both the labor of mill work and the labor of domestic work were gendered and rooted in rural mountain tradition. The mills replicated a gendered division of labor assigning the more physical manual labor to males and the repetitive less physical labor to women and children. When women began working in the mills, they replicated mountain tradition of their double duty

of farm labor and domestic labor. Therefore, solidarity among women was also understood as family relationship where their labor of wage-earning extended into the social labor of the caretaking of their families as well as their fellow wage workers. As its title reveals, *To Make My Bread* is Lumpkin's story about a Depression era struggle of survival represented through a socialized network of maternal laborers. The female millworkers not only labored in bread-winning, but they also labored in bread-baking, childbearing, child burying, and community bridge-building for creating and sustaining political activism among the working-class.

In the first chapter of *To Make My Bread*, Lumpkin reveals the impact of economics and patriarchal oppression upon the maternal experience through metaphors of nature and gendered labor. Lumpkin locates the economic centers of the rural mountain community, Swain's General Store and Barren She Mountain, as masculine space. In Swain's, a small group of men sit around a potbellied stove smoking pipes and sharing gossip about Possum Hollow. When the steers begin to bellow outside the store, Sam Wesley "remembered that his woman must have meal for supper." As he departs the store, he cautions his friends, "[s]omething's a-happening up yonder" (9). The steers appear to sense the fury of the impending blizzard, and their restlessness reminds their owner of the need to bring home cornmeal for bread baking. Steers are castrated bulls that are raised for beef as well as for farm work. These steers appear to symbolically bellow a warning of economic castration, which represents the impotency of the mountain economy. Lumpkin does not narrate any exchange of money for the cornmeal, implying that Wesley, like most mountain families, would be charging it to an account at Swain's General Store.

Using the unpredictability of weather as the topic of male concern, Lumpkin foreshadows the economic devastation upon the mountain families as a threat to masculinity. Swain sells his store to a lumber company; the lumber company will dupe the families and take their land. The

government will also legally dismantle the last remaining vestige of mountain economy, moonshine business up on Barren She Mountain. However, Lumpkin also foreshadows hope for the working-class with the reproductive labor and birth of the McClure infant which is also happening “up-yonder” on a ridge above Possum Hollow. Although the father of the infant died of a fever, the birth of his heir, Emma’s son, plays out in the novel as the originating story of a revolutionary proletariat who will lead the working-class resistance. Not only does Emma’s reproductive labor deliver hope for a working-class revolution, but Lumpkin also posits the maternal body of the proletariat’s mother within the storm as a resisting force against economic oppression.

In the public space of Swain’s General Store, Lumpkin also genders the labor of men who run the bootlegging business up on “Barren She Mountain.” Read metaphorically, the feminized mountain that is both “barren” and a “she” represents an illicit space outside of the patriarchal law where an illegal alcoholic beverage is produced as well as a space which fails to produce legitimate heir from the seeds that are sown into its soil. The mountain’s barren soil and lack of marketable crops symbolize the impotency of the southern farming economy. The betrayal of Barren She Mountain is further compounded by the illegitimacy of moonshine economy. Not only is the mountain reproductively barren, but any economic production from the mountain is also rendered illegitimate by patriarchal law within the capitalist system.

As a trope of nature, the snowstorm that is stirring up in the mountains also represents the industrialization that will sweep through the mountain range. In recreating a contradictory nature as a nurturing pastoral replete with naïve mountain folk and as a destructive storm, Lumpkin also emphasizes the contradictory nature of her maternal characters where the bodies of mountain women represent both relational caretaking and organized resistance. Lumpkin’s snowstorm

occurs on April 19, 1900, a date, which in the Appalachian region of the North Carolina, corresponds to the season of spring and a metaphorical rebirth. Yet Lumpkin's storm permeates the public masculine space of the local store and reduces the men to a state of helplessness and inadequacy when they attempt to return home.

In Swain's General Store any danger of the storm "coming up hard" is dismissed by Jim Hawkins, who voices a symbolic rural naïveté of the danger of industrialization with, "If it was winter, I'd be making tracks for my cabin" (7). The men resist returning home and continue puffing their pipes around a public stove. Their silence is broken by the entrance of Young Sam McEachern, who is searching for Granpap Kirkland so he can "get his help in the business they carried on" (7-8). Granpap's absence from his usual community of men suggests that he, too, disregards the threat of the storm and tends to the business up on Barren She Mountain rather than making tracks for his cabin. The silence is again broken when one man is seen shivering against the cold and Sam McEachern asks, "A rabbit run over your grave?" Sam's superstitious question about a rabbit is rooted in rural folklore. It is both reproductive and destructive as a metaphor of an overly abundant reproductive ability and a foreshadowing of death. Moreover, Sam's reference to the grave plays out in the novel as his denial of paternal responsibility in the pregnancy of an unmarried woman and his murder of his rival, Emma's son, Basil. Ultimately, Sam McEachern himself is murdered as the fictional recreation of the only deputy sheriff to be shot at Gastonia. Thus, the threat of a snowstorm in early spring and the symbolic fertility of the rabbit folklore contradict their associations with the sentimental pastoral nature and imply of a more threatening beast. Conversely, any sense of safety is implied through the domestic space of the cabin.

Despite their dismissal of the early warnings of a snowstorm, Lumpkin's naïve males are forced to face the blizzard in order to rescue the farm animals that were not sheltered. Lumpkin does not narrate the storm's impact on the men or on the livestock. Rather, the impact of the storm literally rages violently and wreaks its force upon maternal bodies. Lumpkin narrates the physical impact of the blizzard through a nameless female community, "Women stood outside the doors with snow stinging their faces like wasps and called to their men, or crawled to meet them, trying to make their shrill voices heard above the wind" (10). Lumpkin's maternal caretakers are concerned for the safety of their husbands and sons, who are blinded by the blizzard and unable to find their way back to their cabins. The women not only stand outside their cabins and bear the impact of the "stinging" violence of the storm, but they also reduced to crawling into the direction of the blizzard and guide their husbands and sons toward the safety of their cabins.

The storm repeats its violence at the McClure cabin: "Emma stood outside the door and screamed to them. She could not stand long against the strong wind. It blew her against the wall of the cabin with the force of a strong man's fist" (10). The storm's rage is compared to an act of male violence against a female when the physical force of the storm throws Emma's pregnant body against the wall. Lumpkin personifies the storm as male: "The wind slapped against the cabin and snarled down the chimney. Snow blew in under the north door and spread over the floor in a hurry and flurry like an unwelcome guest who is trying to make himself at home" (12). However, Emma rises in resistance and continues to call to her father and sons, who seek a direction toward safety. When Emma and her female community confront the blizzard, they are risking their own lives to protect the lives of their families. Although the impact of the storm threatens the lives of the male kin because they are exposed to the elements, the intensity of

storm's violence is actually less destructive. The impact upon Lumpkin's male characters is illustrated with, "They came crawling on hands and knees" (10). Although a male reduced to crawling implies a humbling experience, the brutality of a man's fist represents a violent attempt at complete domination. In constructing two parallel versions of the brutality of the storm against the mountain's female community, Lumpkin constructs a symbolic shared experience and emphasizes a need for unified resistance against the threatening elements of industrialization.

The onset of Emma's birthing labor begins only after Emma has accomplished the caretaking labor for her father and sons. Emma is acutely aware that the storm is separating her from the female community who would assist her in her delivery. In spite of her isolation she continues the care taking of her family as "between the pains" she pours hot coffee to warm her father and relays instructions for cutting the umbilical cord. Emma disregards the storm and focuses upon her delivery, wishing "in herself there was a woman who would know what to do without telling" (12). Lumpkin illustrates the isolation of Emma from her community of women in the absence of another woman to act as midwife. Emma approaches parturition and seeks her bed in a corner of the cabin:

Sitting up on bed she pressed down slowly with her hands over the great lump stirring inside. Others had done this for her before to help the child come. She found that she could not do this for herself. The hot pulling cramp forced her to lie back and scream again. A bear was gnawing at her belly, pulling at the muscles with its strong teeth. She felt its fur on her face and beat at the fur with her arms. It was Granpap's beard. (12)

Lumpkin emphasizes Emma's wishing for the presence of someone who knows how to assist in delivery by pressing on her abdomen. Emma has gained this knowledge from "others" through her experiences in childbirth, but discovers that her pain prevents her from performing this procedure. The only adult presence within the cabin is Emma's father; in response to his daughter's screams, he takes on the role of midwife.

Theorist Joseph R. Urgo notes the violent imagery surrounding Emma's birthing scene and contends that her father's "delivery of her dead husband's son underscores the complete domination of her body by males" (72). Although Urgo's argument confirms the literal male presence, the absence of Emma's dead husband also reflects the absence of male dominance within Emma's domestic sphere. Additionally, the male-personified storm does not defeat the maternal caretakers in their rescue of their male kin, nor does it intrude upon the cabin where Emma labors to deliver her infant. Additionally, Emma's father, Granpap Kirkland, a man scarred from a battle with a she-bear and a Civil War battle, actually resists the role of dominator because "he had known fear and dread in the last few moments since he knew that some time in the night he must deliver Emma of her child" (11). Emma's birth experience is an exclusively female experience where Granpap has no control outside of cutting the umbilical cord. Granpap further demonstrates his lack of power over the birth experience when he fails to follow his daughter's directions on how to cut the umbilical cord at an appropriate length. Lumpkin illustrates the reproductive authority of Emma and her community of women as exclusively female knowledge when Emma's son later reveals, "The protruding navel . . . had something to do with his birth and the fact that Granpap had cut the cord instead of some woman who knew her business" (53). Emma's father's lack of skill is not only reflected through a permanent scar on a future proletariat, but the grandfather is also feminized through his grandson's comparison to a woman who would have had skill and knowledge that surpassed that of the elder patriarch.

Granpap is not a fearless dominator because the birth experience proves more overpowering than the bloody battles between men and the battles with maternalized raging she-bears. Lumpkin parallels Emma's female experience of birthing with her father's performance in his hunting experiences; Emma's resistance to male domination is evident in her courageous

reproductive labor experiences. Lumpkin's description of Emma's labor pains resembles her father's description of his "she-bear" as she feels a "bear gnawing at her belly, pulling at the muscles with its strong teeth." When Emma realizes the fur of the bear is really her father's beard as he bends close to "tell her to keep covered," she pushes him away because "[i]t was not possible to bear the agony of one hair touching her" (11-12). Pushing her father away enacts a resistance to her father's presence in her reproductive experience, and Emma defeats the beast by bearing her child through her body's own natural process of giving birth.

Although Emma depends upon her father's assistance in the delivery of the infant, her response to his concern for Victorian modesty can also be read as an act of resistance to male domination. Isolation from her community of women, Emma faces her reproductive labor as a solitary act. Emma refuses domination and focuses upon her own mind and body: "There was no Granpap and no children now. Nothing mattered but herself and the pain" (11-13). Emma maintains the ownership of her body, her pain, her space, and her birth process by effacing both her father and her family.

After Emma delivers her son, her father separates himself from his imposed caretaking role and transfers the maternal responsibility to the only other female in the cabin, Bonnie. Granpap covers his daughter, who is lying on the "exhausted on the dry side of the bed," and places his new grandson "in the cradle with Bonnie to keep it warm until Emma would come to and let it suck" (13). Bonnie is the only other female in the cabin and the heat from her body serves in keeping a newborn infant warm. In sharing her cradle, Emma's daughter is symbolically initiated into what contemporary theorist Nancy Chodorow refers to as the reproduction of mothering where "the early mother-infant relationship creates both a foundation for parenting in children of both genders and expectations that women will mother" (7). In her perception of her role as a

maternal caretaker, Bonnie's sense of a shared female reproductive consciousness is rooted in her social role as opposed to her biological role. The cradle-sharing also foreshadows a symbolic maternal-based solidarity between Bonnie and her brother as well as between Bonnie and a gendered working-class. At chapter's end the metaphorical snowstorm is replaced by two hungry infants who lie quietly awaiting the sleeping maternal breast. There is no resistance from the female child in the cradle and her shared role with her mother as an infant caretaker and nurturer marks the beginning of the cycle of maternal-based solidarity for Bonnie as a fictionalized heroine.

Cradles, Kin, and Maternal Caretaking

Bonnie's cradle-sharing indoctrination into mothering extends into the second chapter when six years later she rescues her cradle mate from a rattlesnake. Again, Bonnie's body bears the maternal burden of caretaking, which is reminiscent of her mother's experience in rescuing her brothers and grandfather from the snow storm: "She caught the back of John's jeans and clumsily jerked him against her. The impact of his body on hers brought them down on the slope together, and they rolled down hill until a rock stopped them" (16). Bonnie not only pulls her brother down a hill to safety, but her body cushions his fall and results in Bonnie being bruised and bleeding, John escaping unscathed, and their mother believing that Bonnie merely fell while playing. Bonnie and John do not reveal the details of their snake experience to Emma; their secrecy implies their understanding of maternal authority and the consequences of their confession. Bonnie's actions also allude to a gender expectation that as an older sister, she shares maternal responsibility for her younger brother and, even at age six, lifts some of Emma's maternal burdens.

Along with the maternal care of her younger brother, Bonnie also learns about the gendered boundaries imposed upon women by a patriarchal cultural tradition. As Emma's sister-

in-law, Ora, and cousin, Jennie Martin, are gathering around Emma's loom, Emma's first narrated conversation with her daughter reveals the reinforcement of traditional gender roles. Emma exposes Bonnie's her gendered transgressions as well as those of Ora's daughter, Sally, by referring to them as "boy-girls" who "Always wanted to run around like boys instead of helping [their] Mas." The reprimand is immediately understood and articulated as a single shared thought between Emma and Bonnie. Emma first responds to Bonnie's inquiry about the absence of Ora's eldest daughter with, "Sally's got to stay home." Bonnie concludes Emma's sentence with, "To work for her Ma" (24). Emma's "got to" not only implies that there are no other options for Sally, but also suggests that those carefree days of Bonnie's and Sally's boyish freedom have now ended. The split identity of a "boy-girl" privileges the term "boy" by placing it first, thus subordinating the identity of "girl." In finishing her mother's sentence, Bonnie articulates her respect for the authority of her mother as well as her own understanding of her subordinate position as a female within a caretaking community of the mothers and daughters who understand their domestic responsibilities.

In contrast to Bonnie's carefully mentored maternal training, Lumpkin portrays a young woman whose lack of proper mothering results in the social death of Minnie Hawkins. Minnie's mother, as well as the moral guardianship represented by a mother, is absent. Lumpkin describes Bonnie's unsexed female body as "little and slim" compared to the body of daughter of Jim Hawkins who is slightly older and "plump." Minnie's sexualized body attracts the pursuit of the local boys and results in Minnie's social damnation as a devalued, sexualized object who tempts the local boys toward the sin of fornication. When the rural women notice the boys and men are eyeing the "prettiest girl around the valley," they are filled with a distrust which Lumpkin succinctly explains as, "Then, they remembered her mother" (42). The community of women

must strain to remember the time when Minnie's mother was present. There is no memory of any immoral action outside of her abandonment of her duties as wife and mother.

Lumpkin further emphasizes the moral contrast between Bonnie and Minnie in the spiritual coming-of-age ritual of baptism down by the river in Possum Hollow. The preacher immerses Bonnie and she is "saved" from mortal damnation. However, when Minnie glances at Emma's son, she slips from the hands of the preacher as well as slips from baptismal saving grace. In the eyes of her community of onlookers, Minnie's lack of salvation leaves her with the stain of the original sins of her mother. The ill-timed presence of Emma's son riding a horse through the baptismal waters fails to evoke any community scorn. However, Minnie's questionable "baptism was the subject of many discussions for years afterward, especially when Minnie herself later became the chief subject of talk in the community" (64). Lumpkin implies that Minnie's lack of a maternal bond also indicates a lack of a mother's moral training. Minnie reenacts her mother's fall from patriarchal religion's grace when she, too, abandons her infant. Minnie's lack of a mother also implies her lack of the social ability to be a part of the maternal caretaking within her female community.

However, Minnie's lack of a maternal influence and her social alienation from her rural community serve as Emma's lesson to Bonnie in female solidarity when Minnie conceives a child of unknown paternal origin. As a social pariah bearing an illegitimate child, Minnie is cast out of her father's home and left to fend for herself. Although rumor suggests several possibilities which include both of Emma's sons and Sam McEachern as possible fathers, Emma McClure believes that the possibility of the child being a McClure is enough to warrant her embracing Minnie as family. Emma takes Minnie into the already overcrowded cabin where there is barely enough food available for the McClure family to survive.

Surrounded and supported by the McClure women, Minnie's reproductive labor is contrasted with Emma's birthing experiences. Emma describes her own labor by saying, "Mine all came hard." Lumpkin announces Minnie's labor and delivery a single sentence: "A few moments after Ora arrived Minnie groaned a little, and there was a baby" (93). Minnie's ease of labor suggests that the pains of childbirth appear to have very little to do with questions of morality or legitimacy. Emma's maternal embrace of Minnie suggests that acceptance by other women who share the knowledge and experience of childbirth can ease the burden and the pain for other women. The knowledge of the women who assisted in Minnie's childbirth is the knowledge of shared female experience where women extend their nurturing and caretaking of children to the nurturing and caretaking of each other.

Lumpkin also draws upon Minnie's pregnancy and parturition to emphasize Bonnie's rite of passage into womanhood as well as into a culturally-reproduced sense of maternal solidarity. The onset of Bonnie's menstrual cycle and her surrogate motherhood of, and maternal separation from, Minnie's infant symbolize the severe economic desperation that forces the rural families out of their homes and into the mills. The menstrual event is narrated through Emma's maternal reflections: "Bonnie was getting older and *it* had come upon her. For herself, Emma could do with any rags that came along, but for Bonnie she wanted the soft cloth. If she went to the store, Hal Swain would probably give the cloth on credit" (author's emphasis 109). Both Bonnie and Emma share the universal, yet unnamed, experience of "it." Despite the secrecy, mother and daughter share an exclusive female experience through their mutual identification as reproductive menstruating bodies.

In combining menstruation as both a shared female experience and an economic hardship, Lumpkin illustrates a sense of social consciousness that is understood as an exclusively female

experience of economic desperation. Emma's hope for her daughter's economic future is also revealed through their bodily functions where Emma wants to nurture her daughter as a woman and provide a soft cloth to take care of a woman's reproductive cycle. Where Emma's menstrual and childbirth cycles are marked by rags and agonizing labor symbolizing poverty and pain, Emma's desire for a soft cloth implies her hope for a softer and easier life for her daughter. Yet the link between mother and daughter is overshadowed by the need for more credit at the general store. Lumpkin's representation of Bonnie's menarcheal event within the novel was revolutionary, implying the possibility of female bonding through the shared experience of a female coming-of-age ritual and the possibility of female solidarity through a shared understanding of how economic desperation affects women's bodies.

The economic desperation that finally forces the family to leave the mountain parallels Bonnie's separation from her nurturing role as the surrogate mother of Minnie's infant. Shortly after her delivery, Minnie leaves the supportive community of the women in the McClure household, and Bonnie assumes the role of surrogate mother to Minnie's abandoned infant. Lumpkin emphasizes a surrogate maternal nurturing: "Bonnie couldn't be budged from the baby inside [the cabin]. She wanted to hold it continually" (94). When Minnie's father hears that the McClures are leaving the mountains to work at mills located in the valley, he comes to claim his grandson. Bonnie's painful maternal separation is also parallel to the painful separation of the McClure family from their land. In the silence that follows the grandfather's request, Bonnie cries out, "Hit's mine...I raised it. . . . Bonnie cried all the way down the valley..." (139). Bonnie believes the baby belongs to her because she was responsible for the caretaking and nurturing of Minnie's son. Similarly, the McClures believed in their ownership of their inheritance because they, too, nurtured and cared for their land. The senselessness of the

separation of an infant from a nurturing community represents the separation of the working-class from their livelihood, and Lumpkin posits the need for a return to a maternal-based solidarity as a viable model of caretaking ownership as well as activism for unifying a working-class collective.

Grinding Bones and Making Bread from Maternal Bodies

Scarred by a maternal separation and a lack of rags for her menstrual flow, Bonnie's coming of age marks the turning point in the novel that symbolizes the economic deterioration of an agrarian tradition. Out of desperation, the McClure family moves toward the industrialized modernity of a mill town. Trusting in promises of high wages, education for their children, and homes with electricity, the McClures journey to what Lumpkin refers to as the "outside." However, the outside reneges on its promises, and Lumpkin symbolizes this harsh reality through a child's fairy tale in which an ogre consumes dreams as well as maternal bodies. Bonnie reads the grim fairy tale to the children, who are too young to attend school. What would appear to be a nurturing scene of maternal caretaking in reality foreshadows the fate of the millworkers: "And the ogre said, 'I'll grind your bones to make my bread'" (219). Since the millworkers struggle to make enough money to buy bread, the ogre embodies the monster of industrialization, which grinds their bones with low wages and physical exhaustion.

Lumpkin illustrates the ogre's grinding wrath through Emma's maternal body. In sacrificing the health of her physical body through hunger as well as hard physical labor, Emma develops pellagra and her maternal body becomes the sacrificial bread for the capitalist ogres. While Emma works for wages to feed her children, protein for her is in short supply. She deprives herself of nutrition so that there is more food on the table for her children. Lumpkin illuminates how survival for the millworkers in the Depression era was a gendered hierarchical structure with the bodies of mothers and children bearing the brunt of the brutality.

Lumpkin undoubtedly witnessed cases of pellagra and noticed that it struck maternal bodies with great frequency. Contemporary medical studies now show that while young children seem to be affected the hardest by pellagra, the bodies of female millworkers were ten times more likely to succumb to this vitamin deficiency than male workers. This statistic implies a hierarchical favoring of bodies when meat or dairy products were available (Hall, et al. 150). Lumpkin reveals a traditional agrarian life pattern where men were engaged in manual field labor and women worked in the home. Based on physical needs, men required more sustenance to support their manual activity so the dinner table reflected a nutritional pecking order. Additionally, most women favored their children over themselves in the division of nutrients. The agrarian tradition of male privilege and maternal privileging at the table carried over into the urban environment, and the bodies of the female millworkers bore the resulting pellagra.

Lumpkin contrasts the deterioration of Emma's body with the maturing of Bonnie's body as well as with the development of Bonnie's maternal-based working-class consciousness. Bonnie marries Jim Calhoun, who immediately departs for the war, leaving a pregnant Bonnie behind to care for her invalid mother in addition to working long hours in the mill. Bonnie's infant, Little Emma Calhoun, silently appears in the same way Bonnie appeared in the first chapter, as a presence in the cradle. Bonnie "was soon up and waiting on the baby and Emma together, and then back in the mills at her frames" (283). Inspired by her hungry infant and her sense of justice, Bonnie confronts the mill boss and requests time off "to nurse the baby." Bonnie "was so sure that what she wanted was a good and natural thing, there was no thought in her of being denied." Bonnie's maternal request is not a request for privilege. She expresses her willingness to "lose the money while the machines are idle." Mr. Burnett responds, "If I let you, . . . I'd have to let every young woman who's got a young baby do the same. And there are

plenty of babies in this village, Bonnie.” Bonnie’s anger is sparked and she responds, “And plenty of them dies. . . . It was the first time she had said such a thing to anyone in a long time, and the first time she had spoken that way to one of the higher-ups” (283-284). Framed as maternal consciousness and fueled by a sense of social justice, the resistance of Lumpkin’s protagonist transgresses both the boundaries of gender and the boundaries of class. Lumpkin dares a conscious literary expression of female resistance within a patriarchal culture as both a reproductive consciousness and a social consciousness.

Bonnie’s role as the maternal breadwinner is challenged further after Emma’s death when her caretaking extends to her husband who escapes injury in the war but loses his hand in a mill accident. Jim’s health deteriorates along with his ability to function in the role of husband and provider. Bonnie minimizes her husband’s failure in his traditional role and states: “He had become careless about everything, and uninterested. He had never been the best sort of husband, but Bonnie understood him and had learned early not to expect too much” (315). Ironically, Bonnie reverses the expectations of gender roles. When her husband fails to be a good provider, she compensates by having lower expectations and working harder as a maternal caretaker and breadwinner.

In contrast to Bonnie’s maternal self-sacrifice, Jim Calhoun subscribes to a separate standard for survival. He is also the child of a single woman who was abandoned by her husband and worked in the mills. The lack of a father also represents a lack of a model of paternal responsibility, and Jim reproduces his father’s behavior pattern by abandoning Bonnie. Bonnie’s forgiveness and compassion for her husband are illustrated through the language of a maternal reproductive body: “Loving was as natural to her as the breath she took into herself without thought, so she had a child every year” (315). Lumpkin illustrates how many rural women

understood their reproductive destiny by equating sexual passion with “loving” and, inevitably, with childbirth. Bonnie’s perception of her reality is relational. Bearing the burden of a husband who has been emasculated and crippled by both the war and the mill demonstrates her love as much as bearing an infant yearly demonstrates her love.

After Jim Calhoun abandons his family, Bonnie demonstrates her resistance to cultural traditions which closely parallels the historical resistance of the real-life Ella May Wiggins and her subsequent death: Bonnie’s outward defiance of the southern tradition of race segregation and her union activism ultimately lead to her death. At first, Bonnie’s choice to live in Stumptown, a predominantly African American neighborhood, is a pragmatic choice rather than an act of defiance. In her position as a single mother, Bonnie no longer qualifies for mill housing so she makes an economic choice to move into “a cabin that had been lived in by colored people.” Living outside of mill housing, Bonnie is further away from any community support and again makes an economic choice where “[d]uring the day, she left the children at home with five-year old Emma” (317).

Like her mother and her grandmother, little Emma is culturally indoctrinated into the reproduction of mothering and a sense of separation. Lumpkin illustrates the shared responsibility between mother and daughter: “Each morning [Emma] rose at four, made her own breakfast, and left coffee and a pot of hominy with flour gravy on the stove where little Emma could reach them when the children awoke” (317). Yet in spite of the little Emma’s caretaking, her infant brother dies. On the day Bonnie buries her child, she realizes that little Emma is still a child herself. Bonnie makes another pragmatic choice and embraces the friendship of a “colored” co-worker, Mary Allen. Mary sends her fifteen-year-old daughter, Savannah, to help Bonnie with child care. Bonnie’s relationship with Mary Allen and Savannah emerges as a climactic point in

Lumpkin's novel where Bonnie faces her own racial prejudice with "shame" and recognizes that she, Mary, and Savannah share a maternal-based bond. Lumpkin illustrates a mutual maternal understanding that crosses the boundaries of race:

Bonnie's terror about the other children left alone had been made so much greater by the death of one. And Savannah's presence during that week made her anxiety less. It was her need to have that anxiety lightened when the new grave had just been covered up that Mary Allen understood. (321)

Regardless of racial difference, Bonnie is supported by Mary Allen and Savannah because Mary not only "understood" the loss of the child in the grave but also understood the terror and the burden of maternal guilt for leaving the remaining children unattended.

The Allen women also understand that their own maternal roles are caretaking roles without race or class. The support of the Allen women suggests the possibilities for a maternal solidarity that can extend into a cooperative maternal-based activism where Bonnie's goals as a union organizer also benefit Mary Allen and her family. Lumpkin argues for racial equality through Bonnie: "The colored people work alongside of us, . . . I can't see why they shouldn't fight alongside us, and we by them" (350). At a time in the Jim Crow South, when African American families were one step lower than poor white trash, the "family" relationship that existed among the workers at the mill was racially determined according to southern tradition. Yet Lumpkin draws the millworkers together in maternal solidarity for the union cause. The "fight" is for something as basic as the human need to survive. Until the death of her own infant, Bonnie does not understand that her relationship to an African American woman is an instinctive bond of survival. The death of a child draws them both into a shared maternal experience where a human act of charity crosses cultural barriers and illuminates a maternal-based activism.

By entering Bonnie's home and offering service, Mary Allen's actions are not outside of any racial boundaries because her act of charity originates from a position of servitude in

southern tradition. However, through Bonnie's acceptance of Mary and the African American community of millworkers and her physical presence within the African American neighborhood where she and her neighbors share in a struggle to survive, Lumpkin reveals the revolutionary possibility of racial integration.

When Mary Allen becomes a part of the mill's reduction of workers and is "given her time," Bonnie attends her first union meeting. By the following week, Bonnie also receives her notice of termination and she begins union organizing among the female millworkers. Like her historical counterpart, Bonnie not only transgresses racial boundaries by making her home in Stumptown, but she also transgresses gendered boundaries by recruiting as union members her African American community of neighbors who also need a livable wage. Lumpkin represents Bonnie's union appeal to her African American co-workers as a need for bread as well as a need for maternal-based solidarity. Bonnie relates the shared bond of survival: "She felt a sympathy for them, since, like her, they were poor and only wanted to make their bread..." (359). For Bonnie the cry for bread is also a cry for worker solidarity across racial barriers.

Bonnie's cry for bread no longer mimics the teacher in the mill school who reads tales to children about ogres; she fights the ogre of industrial exploitation who devours the bodies of herself and her children and joins the workers on strike at Wentworth Mill. Bonnie believes the strike will defeat the ogre, and she listens attentively to the promises of the union organizer who "had a message that was founded in the facts of her everyday life." The organizers promise enough food and better education for the children. The strike organizers advise, "Be true to yourself and your own, and you can't go far wrong" (340). Following the advice of the union organizers to be true to herself, Bonnie writes her mill mother's ballad: "How it grieves the heart of a mother/You everyone must know./But we can't buy for our children'/Our wagers are too

low./It is for our little children/That seem to us so dear./But for us nor them, dear workers/The bosses do not care” (345-346). Bonnie’s ballad reveals the truth for her and for her own children. Bonnie’s song inspires a mass walkout leaving the Wentworth Mill “almost empty of workers” (348). Lumpkin’s millworkers identify with the working-class solidarity that is born in the heart of a grieving mother whose everyday life is rooted in maternal care taking.

Bonnie’s next ascent to a union platform as a maternal activist revises historical reality when Lumpkin’s fictional Wiggins dies on the union platform rather than on the back of a truck. In locating Bonnie on the union platform, she is located in a subject position and her death reflects the silencing of a mother’s lament as well as the silencing of a reproductive body. As a political agent, Bonnie delivers a message of revolutionary consciousness as she would deliver an infant, as a labor of love. Although Bonnie dies, her message of maternal solidarity lives on through the lyrics of her ballad. Inspired by Bonnie’s message and martyrdom, the strikers descend upon the fictional Wentworth Mill just as they did upon the Loray Mill in Gastonia. Although the first shot of the working-class revolution was fired upon a maternal body standing on a union platform, Bonnie’s death reflects the martyrdom associated with death in childbirth. Bonnie died giving birth of a reproductive social consciousness.

As a fictionalized representation of Ella May Wiggins, Lumpkin’s Bonnie McClure-Calhoun demonstrates a model of maternal solidarity as she gives birth to social consciousness and dies as the lyrics of a maternal ballad and the dream of working-class revolution live on. At the end of the novel, Lumpkin implies the possibility of a working-class revolution by claiming, “[t]his is just the beginning” (384). Despite the tragic ending, Lumpkin suggests that the story of Ella May Wiggins is a story of beginnings. While Lumpkin was in her “Communist Phase,” she planted the seeds of revolution, through the militancy of the martyred maternal body of Ella May

Wiggins as well through the stories of the female southern millworkers in North Carolina. Lumpkin depicted a maternal-based model working-class protest that inspired a social consciousness across class distinctions. As historical testimony of female agency and subjectivity during the Depression era, the life and the ballads of Ella May Wiggins reflect more than just a sentimentalized “Mill Mother’s Lament.” Grace Lumpkin invokes Wiggins’ militant lyrics as a millworker’s maternal cry for bread for hungry children, and creates *To Make My Bread* as a mill writer’s cry for a working-class sympathy and a maternal-based solidarity.

CHAPTER 4
DOROTHY MYRA PAGE: WEARING THE RADICAL RED SHOES OF MATERNAL
SOLIDARITY IN *GATHERING STORM: A STORY OF THE BLACK BELT*

Maternal Memorial

Early in 1993, Dorothy Myra Page, a radical 1930s novelist, essayist, feminist, and communist, was asked by her biographer how she wanted to be remembered. Page chose her traditional gender identities over her political activist identities and said that she wanted to be remembered as “a good mother and a good wife” (qtd. in Baker xxiii). Christina Looper Baker’s biography, *In a Generous Spirit: A First Person Biography of Myra Page* includes extensive interviews with Myra Page, who shares her maternal experiences as well as her professional experiences as a writer. Page’s dedication to her children was also balanced by her dedication to her career. Page told Christina Looper Baker “the woman who works is a much better mother for her children. She is more a part of the real world they’re growing up in if she takes her job seriously” (Baker 174). Because she shared a sixty-six year marriage with John Markey and raised two children, as well as living the tenets of her socialist ideology, it is clear that Page took her all of her jobs seriously. Yet, Page’s focus on the importance of her own maternal identity offers a valuable insight into the characterizations in her writing. In 1932 Page privileged the maternal identity of another working mother when she fictionalized the life and murder of Ella May Wiggins in her novel, *Gathering Storm: A Story of the Black Belt*. Page recreates the maternal body of Wiggins as well as the maternal bodies of the women who worked at Loray Mill as political bodies invoking a traditional gendered role as a model of maternal activism that would create a better world for working-class women and their children.

This chapter briefly addresses how Page’s personal and political experiences both resist and embrace tradition and inform her revolutionary writing. The balance of the chapter focuses on Page’s fictional portrayal of the psychological and physiological experiences that shape the

lives of the female millworkers through her protagonist, Marge Crenshaw and a fictionalized Ella May Wiggins. In recreating the lives of working-class women in a fictional Gastonia, Page presents a viable model of maternal activism that inspires working-class sympathy and female solidarity.

Page, like many other female writers of the 1930s, relied upon her own experiences as a woman to write about the experiences of other working-class women. Although the working-class feminine rhetoric of the early 1930s focused heavily on motherhood as debilitating, Page and the other female Gastonia novelists viewed the maternal body as a political body. The maternal body invokes the power of a traditional gender role as a woman's means of challenging the social injustices of her real world. In *Red Feminism*, Kate Weigand uses the term "maternalist style of activism" to refer to the recreation of traditional gender roles as activist roles (5). In telling the story of Ella May Wiggins, Page relied upon the maternal body to represent and reveal a model of model activism that not only inspired the resistance of the working-class, but also inspired the sympathies of her readers' for motives behind the millworkers' strike.

The real-life Ella May Wiggins was a mother, motivated by her concern for the survival of her children, who actively worked for the unionization of the millworkers and their protest against substandard wages and working conditions. Wiggins, inspired working-class solidarity among the southern millworkers and evoked the sympathies of an upper class by invoking her traditional maternal role in her ballad, "Mill Mother's Lament." She urged workers to fight for higher wages because "it is for our dear children" (Page 336). Wiggins was a single mother who, after she was abandoned by her husband, reclaimed her maiden name of May and fought for better wages and working conditions. Wiggins lost her life on the way to a union rally in

Gastonia where she had hoped to inspire maternal-based solidarity among the workers who would strike for their dear children. Her death inspired a wave of strikes across the Carolinas. Although the strike at Gastonia failed, the *Labor Defender* dedicated its October 29, 1929, edition as a memorial to Ella May Wiggins who would be remembered as a woman who died for the cause of labor and became a “martyr for an organized South” (Salmond 156).

Six years after Wiggins’ death, Page, pregnant with her first child, wrote an article for the *Labor Defender* reminding her readers of the promise made in their 1929 edition, “We’ll not forget you, Ella May” (qtd. in Baker 144). On April 21, 1935, the same day that Page was writing her memorial article to a maternal martyr, she became a mother, giving birth to her daughter, May Markey (Baker 144). While Baker’s biography attests to Page’s success as a mother and wife, it also accurately attests to Page’s success as a radical voice of the 1930s who dared to write about Ella May Wiggins as a good mother and a good unionist. Page also remembered Wiggins six years later as a mother who gave her life for maternal activism as well as for union solidarity.

Shield of Southern Tradition

Baker’s biography also reveals Page’s private journey toward her radical social consciousness as a young woman, Dorothy Gary, whose goals went beyond marriage and motherhood. Dorothy Gary’s goals were so far outside of her family’s southern tradition that she adopted the pseudonym of Dorothy Myra Page to shield them from embarrassment and from knowing about her affiliation with the Communist Party. Page asserts that throughout her life she was a woman who was “held *up* by tradition and held *by* tradition” (qtd. in Baker xxiii, author emphasis). Nonetheless, she transgressed those boundaries of tradition by challenging the southern traditions of her upbringing in Newport News, Virginia, and embracing the new and revolutionary ideas of the American Left through her membership in the Communist Party.

Page's exposure to the real world of the working-class and southern tradition came early in her life. As a child, she accompanied her father, Dr. Gary, a physician in Newport News, on his house calls where he tended both white and black patients. Page's mother, Willie Alberta Barham Gary, devoted herself to the traditional "obligations of white southern womanhood" (Rosenfelt 248). Despite her more liberal upbringing, which permitted cross-class friendships with the children of the dock workers, Page quickly learned that her family had more traditional expectations for her. Her brother was expected to carry on her father's medical practice and she was expected to follow her mother's example: marry, oversee the house, and produce children. She resisted the family's expectation of marriage, broke her first engagement, and left Newport News to attend West Hampton College, the women's branch of the University of Richmond.

Discouraged from pursuing a medical degree, Page majored in English as an undergraduate student, but her college experiences led her toward a doctorate in sociology as well as toward leftist ideologies. As an English major, Page struggled with her writing and was advised to write about the things she knew. However, what Page knew and experienced in growing up in the South made her angry. Page she told her biographer, "I knew I wanted to write, but I wasn't ready to write about the South" (Baker 38). Although Page could not understand how some people in the South were held back from equality through gender discrimination, class distinction, and racial segregation, she had no solutions to the social ills that plagued the South, only resentment of the inequities.

Instead of writing, Page took a teaching position in Newport News for a year and then entered Columbia University in pursuit of her master's degree. In 1919, while studying at Columbia, Page was introduced to working-class consciousness and the Leftist movement at the Rand School in New York. There she attended lectures by Scott Nearing, who later befriended

Page and her future husband through their shared interest in the Communist Party. Page also attended lectures by Anna Louis Strong, who presented her personal account of the political changes occurring in Soviet Union. Page also met the radical labor reporter, Mary Heaton Vorse, at the Rand School. At Columbia, Page was inspired to join the Social Studies Club, which led to her political involvement in the strikes of 1919 as well as reaffirming her beliefs in leftist ideology (Baker 45).

After finishing her master's degree, Page worked briefly as the YWCA's industrial secretary at a silk plant in Norfolk, but she was forced to resign because of her outside political activities. Page contends that "preaching unionism and socialism" offended the Board of the YWCA as well as the "lawyer's wife" and other "women [who] came from protected backgrounds . . . none [of which] had ever worked outside the home or had any real idea of what the world was like" (Baker 52). Page was acutely aware that she, too, came from a privileged background and had been protected from the real world. Despite her family's protestations, Page moved north to work in the factories in Philadelphia and New York because she believed that "[s]tarting at the bottom in a factory would help [her] to study the working people as one of them" (Baker 54). Despite her efforts in menial sweatshop positions, Page discovered that she could not transcend her privileged position. Unlike the workers at the bottom, Page did not depend upon her salary for subsistence, and she could not communicate with her fellow workers who were "foreign-born girls who spoke little English" (qtd. in Baker 56). Attempts to strike failed because the workers had no other means of financial support and lacked the communication skills to make their needs known. Page learned how the experiences of the working-class were dramatically different from the experiences of the privileged class, and the

recognition of the growing disparities between the classes projected her toward her goal of education for workers.

Page received a fellowship for doctoral study in sociology at the University of Minnesota. In 1925, while in graduate school, she met and married John Markey. Page kept her maiden name, Dorothy Gary, after her marriage. By 1927, both Page and Markey had joined the Communist Party. Although Page admits to being more radical than her husband, she kept her affiliation with the party hidden from her friends and family who were unaware of her work as Dorothy Myra Page (Lane 158). It was shortly after their marriage in April that Page left her husband in Minnesota to conduct her doctoral research among the female textile workers in North Carolina. Page's sociological study on the behavior patterns of southern textile workers was directed toward the attitudes of female millworkers about children and work. Page returned to Gastonia in the summer of 1926 to continue her research, sharing a room in a boarding house with a millworking mother and her young daughter. Living on the "hill" in mill housing and teaching night school, Page was accepted by the workers; she gained better insight into the lives of working-class women and the need for union organizers to accomplish worker solidarity in order to improve working and living conditions for their families.

Radical Red Shoes

Although Page earned her doctorate in June 1928 with a double minor in economics and psychology, the Great Depression and sexism thwarted her career opportunities at the university level (Baker 92). She then directed her writing toward reporting on labor issues and the struggles of textile workers, sharecroppers, and miners. Page's writing, like most reportage of the era, was polemical and militant. Page believed that the Communist Party of the interwar era offered what seemed to be a viable solution to the social and political ills that plagued the United States, and her leftist views permeated her work. In reporting how the Soviet Socialist Republic was

designing a classless society, Page believed that she possessed a voice of advocacy through her writing. In addition to her visit in 1928, Page lived in the Soviet Socialist Republic for a period of two years where she worked as a full-time correspondent writing for the *Daily Worker*, the *Southern Worker*, *Working Woman*, and the *Moscow News* (Baker 121).

In Russia, Page witnessed a system of socialized medicine that guaranteed sick pay and granted women workers a four-month paid maternity leave, and she envisioned such a system in the United States. Her faith in her vision was not only fostered by the Party, but it was also inspired by the revolutionary changes she was witnessing in the lives of women who appeared to be benefiting from the political and economic changes within the Soviet Socialist Republic. With the changes in health care, Moscow's infant mortality rate had dropped 50 percent; under the collectivist system, every family was guaranteed at least one room per person in apartment housing that also provided child care and laundries (Baker 121-128). Only in retrospect did Page discover that most of the Russian population did not enjoy the benefits of the socialist visionary radical reform. Like so many other disillusioned leftists, she saw only what the Russian government wanted her to see. Yet, under her pseudonym of Dorothy Myra Page, she presented what she believed to be the truth as well as a viable solution for social injustice. Page also believed that the political ideal of a classless society that embraced gender, race, and class as part of a collective identity was still in its infancy; and with maternal caretaking, the political dream could become a reality in the United States.

Page returned to the United States in 1934, ready to inspire social radical reform by attacking the racism and sexism of the South that were so much a part of her own internalized resentment. Page wrote about her own childhood discovery of racial segregation in "Beyond the Color Line" which was published in *Crisis* (Baker 110). Page opened her story with the

forbidden friendship of a little African American boy named Tom, who just wanted to play with a child who was white; and the story of Belle, the family's cleaning woman who could not support her family on three dollars a week. Page ended the story with Ethel, who graduated with honors from Columbia but could not get a job. Tom, Belle, and Ethel were all African American; and the anger and shame of southern tradition poured into her writing (Lane 160). The story of Tom's forbidden friendship plays out again in *Gathering Storm* as the forbidden friendship of Charlie and Myrtle Morgan and Billy and Sam Crenshaw. Page also published *Southern Cotton Mills and Labor* as a non-academic version of her dissertation in the hope of appealing to a working-class audience. *Southern Cotton Mills and Labor* became the foundation for *Gathering Storm: A Story of the Black Belt* and the underpinning of Page's political vision of racial, gender, and class equality.

Page was the most educated of all the Gastonia novelists, and her dissertation study focused on the working mothers and their children, a topic that not only professionally and intellectually stimulated her but one that had evolved from years of researching working mothers and their children. In spite of its literary flaws and blatant didactics, *Gathering Storm* expressed Page's vision of a collective and classless society. Her first novel accomplished precisely what she had intended as a scholar, a teacher, an organizer, and a mother—the presentation of a model of maternal activism that would inspire workers to join in this revolutionary vision. Of the few reviews that *Gathering Storm* received in 1932, most criticized the novel as “too propagandistic” or “political and agitational”; yet, one reviewer praised the Page's theoretical base as an “understanding of one who has studied Marxism and Leninism” (qtd. in Urgo 74). *Gathering Storm* did not garner literary favor with contemporary critics Sylvia Jenkins Cook and Laura Hapke. Both concurred with the early reviewers and faulted the novel as extreme propaganda.

However, Page did not wish to be among the “partisans who pushed politics ahead of art” (Baker 116). Page’s novel is an artistic expression of historical events evolving from her life experiences as researcher, woman, wife, and mother.

On the other hand, Barbara Foley countered the accusations of her contemporaries by recognizing some merit in Page’s depictions of Gastonia. Foley equated *Gathering Storm* with Clara Weatherwax’s *Marching! Marching!* as “offer[ing] more encyclopedic summaries of the party program than do any other novels of the decade” (242). *Gathering Storm* clearly emerged as Page’s “encyclopedic” contribution to the Party’s “Black Belt” resolution of 1928 in her recreation of the atrocities committed against her fictionalized African American family. *Gathering Storm* also emerged as Page’s testimony to the gender inequities in the Depression era South in the 1930s and her belief that solidarity would help create a better world for children, regardless of race or gender. Foley also attested that “[u]nless we cynically refuse to take [Page and Weatherwax’s politically-based] testimonies at face value, we should acknowledge most Depression-era leftists’ fervent belief that altered relations between men and women would be one of the most valued benefits of the ‘better world’ for which they were fighting” (245). The female authors of the Left were not naïve, but rather fighting with what Foley refers to as the Communist Party’s “visionary conscience” (246). Like so many other leftists of the 1930s, Page was living the tenets of her ideology, and her vision of a better world was rooted in the socialist ideals professed by the Communist Party. Page sincerely believed that the Communist Party offered a cure for the economically-based race and gender oppression, and she wrote *Gathering Storm: A Story of the Black Belt* as an artistic model of a better world made possible through maternal activism.

In *Gathering Storm* Page's protagonists, Tom and Marge Crenshaw, are the two oldest of ten children and already entrenched in the long hours for low wages at the Corey Mill in Riverton. Before he is sixteen, an angry and frustrated Tom leaves to find work in the North. In New Jersey, he discovers that his African American neighbor, Fred, has also escaped the Back Row. After some painful lessons about racial equality, Tom and Fred develop their working-class consciousness, join the Communist Party, and become union organizers. At Marge's desperate request for help in forming a union, Tom, returns to North Carolina to help organize the millworkers of the Corey mills.

Conversely, the social conscience of Page's female protagonist, Marge, develops in the southern textile mill towns as she shifts from mill to mill in her attempt to find better wages and better working conditions. By the time young Marge reaches Riverton, North Carolina, she has lost her grandmother, her mother, two children, and her husband to disease and lack of nutrition. Marge is inspired and supported by her co-worker and fellow union organizer, Ella May, who has also lost children and struggles to provide a healthy life for the ones remaining. Marge Crenshaw and Ella May are drawn together in maternal solidarity by their desperate desire for a living wage that would support them and their children and a union that would guarantee equality for all regardless of race, gender, or class.

Although the character of Ella May does not appear until later in the novel, the story of Marge's personal and political development parallels the story of the real-life Ella May Wiggins and characterizes most of the female textile workers whose lives are circumscribed by their yearly reproduction of another mouth to feed and the most meager level of subsistence. By the time Ella May steps onto the union platform, Marge is at her side as a fellow union organizer and another maternal voice of solidarity. When May is shot, Marge cradles the head of her dying

comrade. Although Marge becomes the primary caretaker of May's children, the novel returns to the actual historical events, and the state removes the children from Marge's custody. Shortly after the death of Ella May, Page again alters the historical facts and Marge, along with the male union organizers, is arrested for the murder of the real-life police chief in Gastonia, Orville Frank Aderholt. Released on the grounds of a mistrial, Marge departs with her brother for a union conference in the North where she meets other maternal activists who are seeking a better world for their children. Educated as a union organizer and affirmed by her socialist vision, Marge Crenshaw emerges as a union organizer for the Communist Party and a voice of maternal solidarity (374).

Maternal Legacy of a "Fightin' Spirit"

In *Gathering Storm* Page introduces maternal activism through an oral history narrated by Ole Marge Marlow, the grandmother for whom the protagonist, Marge Crenshaw, is named. At her fourteen year-old granddaughter's prompting, Ole Marge begins her story at the point when, as a young mother concerned for the health and welfare of her children, she tricks her husband into leaving the mountains for the cotton mills. While Ole Marge's narrative relies upon maternal concern for the future of children as justification for female activism, Page also positions the grandmother as a model of maternal activism for young Marge. Living in rural privation, Ole Marge listens attentively to the recruiter from the cotton mills who contends that "some of the city folks heerd how bad off the hill folks was since the war, 'n they be studyin' a way to helpen you, 'n themselves at the same time. So they's buildin' the mills, 'n helping everybody all around" (15). The recruiter implies that the growth of the textile industries in the South is a result of the mill owners' concern for families rather than a concern for profit. He lures the mountain families with a call for help that reflects a collective social responsibility for resolving the economic ills that affect everybody. As a mother, Ole Marge is drawn into the recruiter's rhetoric

because she knows that the family farm is no longer sustaining their meager survival and her children are hungry. The recruiter promises that the mill will provide an education for the Marlow children, a two-room house with electricity, and an outdoor water pump close by. His message not only draws upon a mother's concern for her children's education and comfort, but also promises relief from the drudgery of a mother's domestic labor.

However, Ole Marge's husband, Henry, is skeptical of the stranger's promises and openly resists leaving the mountain. Henry invokes the authority of patriarchal tradition by saying, "My pappy 'n my gran-pappy lived right here is this cabin...." Marge questions patriarchal tradition and justifies her challenge with maternal logic, "Your folks and mine live and die ignorant 'n down-trodden. You want our chillen should be the same? Down in the valley that's schools, so the stranger says, what our chillen can get some larnin', 'n a chanct to live decent, not like pigs in a trough" (15). Page's heavy use of dialect, replete with grammatical errors, not only emphasizes the generational impact of their rural privation, but also emphasizes how the continued neglect of education perpetuates their poverty through each generation. When Ole Marge confesses her radical act of rebellion, watering an already dying potato patch at high noon and scorching the plants to death, she also justifies her actions as the most effective way of confronting entrenched patriarchal ideology. She endorses maternal activism by posing a rhetorical question to her granddaughter, "'N what kin you do, when a man's so stubborn? He'd never let me'n the chillens go down alone" (17). Young Marge saw no other alternative for her grandmother. Ole Marge's maternal concern for a better life for her children leads her to sabotage her husband's potato crop and forces the family's migration to the mills for the greater good of the family.

At the close of the first chapter, Page parallels the grandmother's victory with the story of young Marge's mother, Sal, as the model of defeat for those who allow their fighting spirit to be beaten back by rural ignorance. As a child, Sal begs to stay in the mountains; she runs away and hides on the day of departure. Although Ole Marge quickly finds her, she recalls the last day in the mountains as the beginning of the emotional death of her daughter, "Seems like the life went plum outa her, like a wild squirrel or a song bird put in a cage" (18). Ole Marge had hoped that education would help to fire the spirit of her child, but the recruiter defaulted on his promise and Sal was caught in a "cage" as a millworker who no longer has the fighting spirit to resist.

The story about Sal's loss of fighting spirit also symbolizes the conflict between religion and resistance. Young Marge is pulled by two opposing maternal forces: her Granny, who is held up by a tradition of resistance, and her mother, who is held back by a tradition of religious restraint. Young Marge's mother tells her that "Parson Brown says we gotta bear our cross in patience, 'n re-sign ourselves to God's mysterious Plan" (37). Young Marge associates the suffering of her family and other working-class families with the symbolic suffering of Jesus Christ. In Parson Brown's analogy, the suffering of the millworkers is inconsequential compared to Messianic martyrdom, yet, Sal's advice to her daughter is immediately contradicted by Granny who argues:

I doan know how come they kin make it out God's plan, the way these mills is run. Seems like we done left God back up in them mountains" . . . Now, thar's a text, for instance, 'suffer the lil' chillen to come unto Me! Fer sech is the Kingdom of Heaven.' But does that mean fer the mill to suck in our babies—does it? (37)

Sal is shocked at her mother's blasphemy and predicts damnation for Ole Marge Marlow, but Ole Marge's wisdom is grounded by her experiences and her observations. Granny Marlow asserts her life experience as she says, "I can't help seein' 'n thinkin' things these forty year" (37). In drawing her self-portrait of experience, Granny Marlow marks her life experience

beginning in adult life with her marriage to Henry Marlow when her observations are directly related to her adult roles as a mother and as a wife. She invokes a fighting spirit that fueled every conflict faced by her kin from the survival instinct of the earliest settlers on the mountain to feuds with neighboring families to male kinfolk going to war to her own personal war with a patriarchal tradition of organized religion that dictated her gendered role.

The conflict between her mother and grandmother ferments in the mind of young Marge and reasserts itself that evening through a metaphorical dream where “Ma was calling, ‘Stop fightin’ ’n pray,’ and Granny hissed, ‘Fight ’em, chile, fight ’em’ ” (48). This generational debate and the metaphorical dream represent the internal conflict for many of the millworkers of the Southern Piedmont, who were torn between their religious tradition of passive obedience and their rural tradition of what Granny Marlow identifies as a “fightin’ spirit.” Through the religious debate between Ole Marge and her daughter, Page articulates her own sense of frustration in confronting the workers’ passivity and resistance to unions as well as the passivity of the female workers who accepted their subordination to a patriarchal system. Page believed that “their religion was a handicap” and “the best approach needed to be one or two appropriate stories and jokes to reinterpret some of their religion to the people” (qtd. in Baker 80). Through Sal’s insistence on religious tradition and Granny’s resistance to religious tradition, Page challenges the emotional manipulation of the church pastors who were paid by the mills to deliver the entrenched patriarchal ideology of passive submission. Ironically, as young Marge observes, “God hadn’t wrecked His punishment on [Granny], any more than on believin’ mill hands” (48). Consequently, young Marge maintains her “fightin’ spirit” and disregards Parson Brown’s sacrificial message of messianic martyrdom.

Page also confronts the idealization of the pastoral mountains through Ole Marge's historical narrative as Granny assures young Marge that life in the mountains is no better than life in the mill village. Despite the resistance of her husband and daughter, Granny cautions young Marge that escaping to the mountains or passively accepting injustice would not resolve their harsh reality any more than escaping through religion would. Granny insists upon education as the path toward liberation when she says, "Thar'd never be schools or nothin' in the mountains. What we had to do was make the mill do what they'd a promised, 'n take the chillen outa the mill'n put 'em in school, 'n larn 'em how to read'n write" (22). Ole Marge confronts the idealism of her daughter and husband with the harsh reality of mountain life, which offers no viable future. Through Ole Marge's maternal activism and an appeal for the education of children, Page destabilizes the trite associations of ignorant, rural mountain folk.

Page documents a history of maternal activism and an organized protest against child labor through Ole Marge's narratives of the textile strikes in the 1890s. Ole Marge tells her granddaughter how she rallied her fellow millworkers and walked out of the mill telling the boss men, "We warn't gona spin nor weave no mo' so long as babies was at the mill stead of at school, 'n we wanted mo' pay" (24). Ole Marge's leadership results in a raise in pay and an age requirement of ten years or older for children working the mill. The victory, as Ole Marge cautions young Marge, "meant privation for many," but it also resulted in Uncle Rem and Aunt Mary being able to "read n'figger, though your Ma never got to go, nor Jackie, nuther" (24). Although Ole Marge's commentary represents a small victory in providing education for her two youngest children, the impact of the mill on Marge's two older children reveals a sadder fact about "privation." A family's economic survival depended upon their children entering the mill

after completing an elementary school education. With the lack of an education or a union, the textile mills controlled their labor force.

Through a comparison of adolescent experiences, Page concludes Ole Marge's didactic, maternal narratives with a final lesson in maintaining a fighting spirit. Granny draws a portrait of class disparity that contrasts the hard life of her granddaughter with the privileged life of the adolescent daughter of the mill owner, Rebecca Haines: "*She* rides around the city in a big car, wears fine clothes, goes to parties, 'n never does a lick of no-kind of work. . . . Soon, the Haines gal'll go off to school somewhar, but she ain't nigh so smart 'n pretty as you. . . . If *they* warn't so rich, *we'd* not be so poor" (author's emphasis 29). Ole Marge emphasizes that Rebecca does not work in her father's mill and that, unlike young Marge, Rebecca will receive a college education.

In the hope of inspiring her granddaughter toward working-class consciousness, Ole Marge emphasizes how young Marge's life can be changed through education. Page makes a maternal appeal for union activism through the physical and intellectual hunger of children as Granny says to Marge, "What we gotta do is fight for our rights. Like we done that time in Georgy. For more vittles 'n more larnin' for our young 'uns" (30). Young Marge's "talk with granny" suggests unlimited possibilities for Marge as a young woman if she is willing to fight for her rights. Granny's advice also diverges from the set of norms for the children of millworkers and suggests that a nutritional diet and education are part of their birthright. As Ole Marge's narrative ends, she elicits a promise from young Marge: "You ain't gona lose that fightin' spirit, be you?" . . . It'll not be easy. But mebbe the way'll open up. It's your only chance" (30).

Page portrays Granny's final days as an economic choice and maternal activism, rather than a passive acceptance of aging and death. Marge's mother loses her job at the mill because

her vision is failing; the youngest daughter, Ruth, quits school and begins to work at the mill. Granny relinquishes her position in the home: “[t]he truth was, now that Sal had been turned out of the mill, Ole Marge felt in the way. It was high time she was off their hands. A family could hardly afford two [unemployed women] ’round the house now, could they?” (92). Ole Marge’s deterioration is marked only by “a disappearing figure,” implying that the body of Granny takes on less nourishment so there will be more food for the children. However, Ole Marge Marlow does not lose her “fightin’ spirit”; rather she fights with a maternal vengeance by choosing to relinquish her turn when the food is passed at the family table so her daughter and her daughter’s children have a better chance at survival. Yet, Granny demands more of young Marge than subsistence survival. She calls her namesake to her deathbed, “Marge, . . . you promised” (100). As Ole Marge dies, young Marge remembers her promise and understands that it is now her turn to carry on her Grandmother’s maternal legacy of a “fightin’ spirit.”

Maternal Challenge of Racial Bigotry in the Black Belt

Early in the novel, Page’s plot shifts two hundred yards from the Crenshaw family in Mill Row to the Morgan family in the Back Row where the clash between southern tradition and racial equality reveals how the southern tradition of racial bigotry held back the “fightin’ spirit” of its African American inhabitants. Through her maternal characterizations, Page reveals the attitude of superiority among the poor whites over their African American neighbors while at the same time characterizing an African American mother who fights to her death to defend her children. Page replicates a story that she first published in *Crisis* about a child’s first lesson in racism. Then she reveals how racial bigotry insinuates itself into the brutal murders of an entire family.

While their mothers are working in the mill, Billy and Sam Crenshaw cross the color boundaries of the field to play in the creek that divides mill housing racially and embark upon a

forbidden friendship with Charlie and Myrtle Morgan. Later, as the Baptist Sunday school teacher, Miss Houghton, explains how “the mill owners and workers were really one big family, of elder and younger brothers,” Billy Crenshaw asks, “Is black and white folks brothers too?” (70) Marge’s mother, Sal, is immediately informed of her children’s transgression; the children receive a “good thrashing” from Uncle Mat and never return to the creek. Concerned over the absence of their friends, Charlie and Myrtle come to the Crenshaw door to inquire if the Crenshaw boys are dead. In defense of her racial privilege, Sal chases the children away with her broom. Sal’s broom is a feminine symbol of domestic labor as well as a symbol of maternal power reinforcing a tradition of white privilege. Sal’s broom strikes the first blow against Charlie and Myrtle, who will later be brutally murdered by a lynch mob.

In contrast, Page confronts Sal’s racism with her protagonist’s recognition of a shared humanity among races. Working a spinner in the mill, Marge barely notices Charlie and Myrtle’s mother, Ma Morgan, who is sweeping the floor around her. One day, Ma Morgan does not come to work in the mill. Instead, her older daughter, Martha, arrives at the mill to explain that her mother is ill and plans to return the next day. Page narrates a silent meeting of Marge and Martha who “looked one another full in the eye” and “it was the first time that Marge had ever beheld a colored person” (74). Marge reveals her recognition of the humanity of her counterpart through her thoughts: “This colored girl must be near her own age; did she have thoughts and feelings like hers?” However, Marge also realizes how their racial difference also affects their material reality as she thinks, “her lot’s worsen’n mine” (74). Page narrates the shift in her protagonist’s social consciousness as countering a tradition that reduces the African American population to a subhuman level. Although Marge’s recognition of Martha’s lot foreshadows the fate of the young African American woman, who will not live long enough to marry or even work at the

mill, it also foreshadows Marge's realization of the lot of her female African American co-workers, who struggle to feed their children on wages that are lower than her own wages.

Page's story of racial hatred extends beyond denying a friendship between two children of different races to denying Martha and her family their existence as human beings. Martha is raped and murdered by the millowner's son, and the events subsequently lead to the massacre of the entire Morgan family and mass exodus of the families who live in the Back Row. According to Barbara Foley, Martha's brutal rape and the murder of the Morgan family illustrate the close alignment of Jim Crow terrorism with class rule (369). A closer look at the maternal images in Page's "Lynch Terror" reveals a portrayal of class rule through an upper-class, white mother who colludes in a violent act of white supremacy. Standing near Martha's dead body, Martha's fiancé, Jim, discovers a gold-handled pen knife with the inscription, "*To Elbert Haines, From Mother, Xmas, 1915*" (author's emphasis 128). The tragic irony of the pocket knife lies in the fact that Haines uses a gift from his mother to brutally rape and murder Martha, his mother's. The gift provides the incriminating evidence against Elbert Haines. Martha's fiancé goes to the country club and fires three shots into Haines's body.

The scene of the second murder was foreshadowed by Haines's mother, who locates herself and her son in a social space of ostentatious, white privilege where she claims she "can't afford to appear twice in succession in the same dress" (68). Page emphasizes Mrs. Haines's racial and economic privilege through the luxuries afforded by her husband's profits where she has the ability to purchase a new evening gown for her appearance at the club as well as an engraved gold penknife for her son. Page also represents white privilege as both gender and class by locating Martha in a slave-like position in Mrs. Haines's household. In an earlier chapter, Martha describes her summer duties in tending to the comfort of southern white womanhood:

“Miz Haines ’n her gals, they lays in bed till afternoon, drinkin’ lemonade ’n readin’, and havin’ us help to fan ’em; so the heat doan worry ’em much” (53). Page uses this depiction of Martha’s slavery to dramatize the power of Mrs. Haines and Elbert over Martha Morgan. Page’s depiction of the maternal power represents how a southern tradition of white supremacy is a weapon of racial bigotry based on gender and class.

In contrast to the complicity of the white mother, Page characterizes resistance through an African American mother. As Jim is exacting his revenge at the country club, Ma and Pa Morgan are burying the body of their daughter under the chicken coop. When the angry mob arrives at the Back Row in search of Jim, Ma Morgan is the first to step out and confront the crowd, “*Meebe you come to see what that Haines bastard did to my gal!*” (author’s emphasis 133). Bent upon revenge for the murder of a privileged white man, the mob does not respond to Ma Morgan’s accusation. As twelve men attack Pa Morgan, Ma Morgan leaps to his defense, followed by Myrtle and Charlie. All of the Morgans are shot and the mob ties the body of Pa Morgan to the back of a Packard and drags it through the countryside (133). Page identifies the lynch mob as both the privileged “business section of Greenville” and the legally empowered “mill and county sheriffs” (133). Despite their economic and legal power, when the lynch mob finds Jim’s hiding place in the woods, they “robbed the mob of their prey” and Jim shoots himself in the head (134). Jim’s suicide is his final act of race and class resistance because the mob will not have the power to demonstrate its white supremacy through another ritual lynching. Although the Morgans have also lost their lives, Ma Morgan faced death defending the honor of her daughter and the lives of her family.

Despite the stereotypical characterizations and the brevity of a single chapter, the brutality of “Lynch Terror” illustrates the harsh reality of the atrocities committed in the Depression era

south against African Americans. Page's didactic narrative, however, not only furthers the development of her protagonist's social consciousness, it also articulates the Communist Party rhetoric of the Third Period from 1928 to 1934 when the party aggressively campaigned in the South against lynchings and for worker solidarity across racial boundaries (Weigand 18). Page achieves her political goal of articulating the Communist Party's rhetoric as well as illuminating how southern tradition fostered racial bigotry. Suzanne Sowinska asserts that in daring a narrative representation of "The Negro Question," Page and other radical female novelists of the Depression era "affirm that discussions of difference and alliances between and among women of various race, class, gender, and ethnic positionalities were very much an important part of previous radical movements and constitute a significant history and tradition" (140). Page draws upon the history and tradition of the South and challenges the supremacy through maternal bodies.

Maternal and Material Contradictions

Following the deaths of Ole Marge and the Morgans, Page focuses her narrative on the development of her maternal protagonist. She begins with sexual initiation and continues through the experiences of abortion, pregnancy, childbirth, childcare, and the ever-present working-class struggle for subsistence survival. As a working-class woman, Marge resists her reproductive role and swears never be like her mother, "Never! Better be ridiculed as an old maid, than that. Life was bad enough without a string of lit'uns coming along as regular as the seasons, weighing you down and sucking your spirit" (101). Page not only draws upon the cultural pressure on women to marry, but also emphasizes how marriage is paralleled with a reproductive destiny that coincides with a woman's physical, emotional, and economic condition. As an "old maid," Marge is perceived as sterile and unsexed; yet, as a married woman, Marge foresees a yearly production of infants that represent an economic as well as a physical burden.

Page deftly demonstrates the relationship among the string of infants, economics, and the millworker's investment in life insurance when the odds of infant survival were at their lowest:

According to custom, each baby had been insured for one hundred dollars soon after its first squawking appearance on the hill. The ten cents a week payment proved a shrewd ghastly foresight, for the death rate kept pace with the high birth rate among mill operatives and their sandy-haired offspring. (175)

Although purchasing life insurance for a newborn with little chance of survival appears callous, it nonetheless produces an example of a shrewd investment reaping an equivalent of three to four months' salary. Page's commentary posits infants as a capitalist gain: if the infant does not survive long enough to work in the mill, the infant still reflects an economic value. The shock value of Page's revelation of insurance profits was no doubt, intended to promote birth control and abortion as class issues. However, Page also echoes the liberal sentiments revealed in the Communist Party's *Working Woman*, which advocated "free, safe, and legal birth control, including abortion, for all women" (Rabinowitz 46-47).

Without knowledge of any birth control methods, Marge's perception of marital sexual relations and maternity are formed from her childhood observations of her mother and father's relationship, which is grounded in sexual submission and burdensome biological reproduction. Sharing a bedroom with her parents, Marge is awakened by "the sounds of a struggle and Ma crying, 'Doan, Pa, doan, I'm a scairt,' . . . Ma had gotten out of bed and run into the far corner" (102). At age seventeen when she is beginning to experience an interest in young men, Marge recalls the incident from a more mature perspective. She asserts that, "[t]hen she hadn't fully understood, but now she did. Sex—a forbidden, evil thing that got you in the corner, and cursed you with extra mouths to feed" (102). As a young woman who is starting to experience sexual desire, Marge is also cognizant of the reproductive consequences and finally recognizes her mother's response as a fear of pregnancy. The "forbidden," for Marge, implies that the pleasure

of human sexual desire can be legitimized only through the religious boundaries of marriage and will inevitably be punished as a sin for the daughters of Eve through pregnancy and childbirth.

At the same time, the cornering evil implies male privilege of immediate sexual gratification without the consequences of paternal responsibility or the wrath of God. Granny's earlier criticism of Marge's father also confirms that maternal responsibility appears to be a gendered concern for the welfare of children as well as an exclusive concern for women. Page illustrates the economic burden of children as solely a maternal responsibility in Granny's claim that Herb Crenshaw "kept comin' back 'n jest stay long enough to leave Sal with another mouth to feed, 'n he'd be off agin (28). Therefore, Marge's interpretation of marriage is predicated upon her observations of a gendered experience where women not only bear the infant, they also bear the burdens of economic and caretaking responsibilities of raising the child. Marge's father seems to have the privilege of appearing long enough to invoke his patriarchal conjugal rights over his wife's body and departing at his leisure, offering no positive paternal influence or economic contribution to the family's survival. Conversely, Marge also observes that maternal responsibility for the survival of an infant begins as a consequence of a sinful desire. Without any form of birth control, a woman is cornered between a choice of becoming an old maid or a mother.

Although Marge first refuses to marry and fall into the reproductive pattern of her mother, she meets and falls in love with Bob Gregory and risks the consequences of her sexual desire. At age seventeen, Bob, like Marge's brother Tom, longs for escape from the drudgery of the mill, but his desire for freedom is thwarted by his desire for Marge Crenshaw, who continues to resist his sexual advances. Marge is doubly trapped by her position at the mill, which fulfils her obligatory contribution toward her family's economic survival, and by her own sexual desire

which, according to her observations of the working-class women around her, inevitably results in a yearly pregnancy. As Bob begs in a passionate frenzy, “[W]oan you marry me, I can’t go on this way any longer?” Bob’s sexual desire is curbed by the rural tradition that dictates intercourse as a marital privilege and a sacred maternal condition.

Marge understands her responsibility in maintaining the religious boundaries and resisting the risk of pregnancy. Her desire is overshadowed by the memory of her mother’s doubly negative utterance, “doan...doan.” Like her mother, Marge understands that submission to her sexual desire is a procreative act equated with marriage. At seventeen, Marge is torn between her sexual desire and the consequences of Bob’s proposal: “Maybe the parson was right after all, it was a sin to see and think such things...Sex – an evil thing – only marriage and children can justify it” (162). However, Marge challenges birth control as class privilege when she wonders, “Why wasn’t thar a way for poor folks not to have so many children? The rich didn’t have them?” (163). Page also illuminates a class disparity in access to birth control information as Marge observes that despite their sexual desire, married women of the upper classes appear to escape the burdens of motherhood. Page portrays the maternal and the material, for working-class women, as colluding adversaries of oppression, trapping reproductive bodies into a physically, emotionally, and economically deteriorating condition.

Page’s heroine consents to marriage only after Bob announces, “I’ve signed up. . . . Woan you, afore I go across?” (163). Pleading as a soldier who is about to depart for war, Bob Gregory uses emotional manipulation to effect Marge’s sexual submission. At seventeen Marge avoids the social stigma of becoming an old maid and marries Bob. Throughout the wedding ceremony Page frames Marge’s fears of fecundity with parallels of marriage and maternity: “Dearly Beloved.. . . Why did Bob have to go? . . . Would she be lucky, or would she get caught right off

and have a kid?” (162-163). Marge is trapped by both her maternal body and by her rural ignorance, both dictated by a religious, patriarchal ideology. The next day her husband departs for active duty and Marge returns to the mill; soon, Marge is “heavy with child and drugged with labor (171).

Chapter VIII, “Marge Questions” opens in the mill with a broken machine belt, allowing some time for the female spinners to discuss the effects of the economy upon their wages. However, Page reveals the underlying issue as maternal concerns, which prompts Marge to question the economics effects of her pregnancy as well as the racial boundaries of women of color who also share similar material and maternal concerns. Her co-worker, Miz Jones, laments “[t]he cost of vittels ’n coal’s gone plum outta sight . . . but our pay envelopes ain’t swelled any.” Marge responds, “ ’N look what goods cost now . . . it’s scandalous.” Annie, the “Negro woman sweeper,” joins the conversation with “[w]inter is here ’n my young’uns ain’t shoes or coats to covern ’em” (172-173). Although some of the white women ignore Annie’s comment, Marge responds, “Yah, Annie, it’s hard goin’s now” (174). Page’s protagonist understands that Annie’s concerns are no different than the concerns of Miz Jones or herself, all of which correspond to their maternal and material conditions. As the women return to work, Marge rises from her seat to join them and feels faint. She silently reminds herself that she must continue to work for two more months to cover the doctor’s bills and other needs. Page illustrates the economic price of motherhood through Marge’s pregnancy when “she felt the child’s kick against her side, a fierce resentment of this added burden went through her” (174). The physicality of these experiences serves as a sharp reminder that Marge will need to leave her spindles for two weeks without pay during parturition and recovery.

When there is no word from her husband for weeks, Marge fears her loss of economic security and she attempts to abort. Marge has no idea how to accomplish an abortion, but she hears the gossip about Miz Briggs using a long shaved carrot; she attempts the same procedure “but her only results were loss of blood and a fever...” (175). Her unsuccessful attempt leaves her with an ever present reminder of her working-class reproductive body producing yet another generation of millhands. In her depiction of Marge’s desperation, Page reveals class disparity through a maternal body where “[e]verybody knew how the rich city women kept from having kids. And if it came to the worst, there were doctors who’d operated, if you were influential and had money. But for those on the hill, there was nobody” (176). As a working-class woman, Marge lacks any control over her maternal or her material conditions.

Marge’s life mirrors her mother’s life and the lives of the other female millworkers, and she delivers a premature baby girl. Her lack of nutrients for breast milk and her inability to schedule her work on a night shift lead to the death of her daughter, Roberta. Marge is stricken with guilt as well as grief as she laments that she could produce neither milk for Roberta nor time off from her work to care for the sick infant. Roberta’s premature death bears testimony to the deaths of so many other infants as well as to the deaths of other female bodies. Shortly after Roberta’s death, the war ends and Bob returns home as an invalid suffering the effects of poisonous gas. At the same time, the mills cut back production as well as profit, and millworkers’ salaries drop further. Believing that the National Union is behind them, Marge and the other millworkers from across the Carolinas go on strike. However, without the backing of the union, the workers, who were not beaten into submission with evictions and lack of credit at the company store, were replaced with more families from the hills. Page justifies the return of

the workers as a maternal-based concern because they “can’t stand their kids cryin’ for vittles any more” (226).

Marge and her husband both lose their positions at the mill, Marge for her union activism, and Bob for his inability to perform even the most menial tasks. Forced to seek another position in another town, Marge departs with maternal words of encouragement, advising the other millworkers not to give up the idea of union organization because “a good union’d be diff’rent. We gotta keep on.” Page parallels the need for a union as a maternal-based concern, “[Marge] pointed toward a group of mill children sitting around the pump. Their one-piece garments hung limp against thin, warped frames, their large eyes staring up at their elders out of solemn, pinched faces” (227). Although the bodies of the children are described as emaciated and “warped” by the lack of nutrients, Page also portrays the children as looking up toward the adults, emphasizing their plea for maternal caretaking. Although her co-workers feel betrayed by the union, Marge views the idea of solidarity as the only hope for the children. In her fictionalization of the first attempts at unionization, Page historically chronicles the initial failures of the AFL’s United Textile Workers Union in the South as the failure of the union to understand the needs of working-class families and achieve worker solidarity.

When Marge and her family relocate to North Carolina, Marge finds work at another mill, becomes pregnant, and delivers a son while Bob contracts tuberculosis. Again, there is no money for doctors or for nutritious food that will allow his body to heal or Marge’s son to thrive. Soon after Bob’s death, Marge’s little Bobby falls victim to pellagra and also dies. Although the death of her husband and child catapult Marge toward maternal activism, their deaths also free her from the constraints of marital and maternal responsibility. As Marge moves among the workers, meeting in kitchens in the evenings after work, promoting a union, the workers resist

complaining that “[m]ill-hands doan never stick together!” and “[t]he union idea is all right . . . but the way it’s run, it’s wors’n nothin’ (255). Page positions Marge as a maternal intercessor who sends a letter requesting the help of her brother, who by this time has become a union organizer for the Communist Party. When Tom returns as the epitome of the educational opportunity and party leadership, Marge symbolizes working-class experience of the southern millworker ready for revolution. Together, the Crenshaws represent Page’s vision of social reform through a maternal-based solidarity.

Maternal Solidarity: Marge Crenshaw and Ella May Wiggins

Beginning with Tom Crenshaw’s repatriation in a fictionalized Gastonia, Page incorporates many of the actual events leading up to the death of Ella May Wiggins. Page portrays Marge Crenshaw as friend and confidant to May, and together their maternal roles meld into a model of maternal activism that inspires union solidarity across boundaries of race and gender. As Lane points out, Marge’s role appears to be diminished when Tom arrives, but their unified efforts at union organization clearly illustrate the need for the solidarity among both male and female workers (176). Once Marge speaks to the workers as a voice of female experience, she defers her place on the platform to Ella May, whose ballads reflect the experiences of all maternal millworkers. The concerns of Tom and the other union organizers are based in wages and working conditions. Marge and Ella May, however, represent the inseparability of the material and the maternal as working-class concerns. Marge’s role, however, is not diminished so much as it evolves into a force of maternal-based solidarity that transcends the boundaries of race and gender.

Page casts Marge into the role of a maternal activist on April 1, 1929, the day of the actual historical strike at the Loray Mill in Gastonia. Tom, posing as a millworker, is discovered by the mill owners and fired, and the men are the first to walk out of the mill shouting, “All hands out.

Against the stretch-out! . . . Come on, women, we're walkin' out for more food for our chillen" (280). As the workers gather at the union hall, Tom draws Marge up to platform stating, "We ought to hear from the women" (283). Despite the protests of the male workers, Marge addresses her audience through both gendered and racial identities: "Mill hands, white 'n colored, we've slaved long enough for Mr. Jenkins. Women-folks gotta do their full share to helpen win" (283). In order for women to do their "full share," Marge understands that union solidarity must cross the boundaries of race and gender. At the chapter's end, she recognizes that as a woman she also has an active part in achieving the union solidarity, and she feels "a new life rising in her" (285). The "new life" is the return of what Marge's grandmother referred to as the fighting spirit.

Marge further demonstrates a maternal-based solidarity when she steps back from the white contingency in the picket line and joins Nancy, an African American woman who tells Marge that her weekly salary is a mere four dollars compared to Marge's seven dollars. Marge understands the economic burden as well as the racial divisions and responds, "Yah, we're all in the same boat, only not many see it thataway yet. But this here strike'll learn us somethin" (289). Beginning with the lessons she learns in befriending Nancy, Marge also discovers that the lessons from the strike come from the sharing of female experience.

While her brother continues to act as the primary leader of the strike, Marge continues her maternal caretaking role by working with Carrie Hapman, Page's fictionalized Vera Weisboard, in the relief store, stretching meager supplies among two-thousand families and organizing adult education classes. Marge also forms a close friendship with Ella May which Page describes as the beginning of a maternal-based friendship:

Ever since [Marge] had heard Ella May sing, 'How it hurts the heart of a Mother,' and other ballads about the union, Marge had felt drawn to this woman. One of those quick deep going friendships that natures like theirs sometimes form had sprung up between them. Ella May's four young-uns sprawled around them. (303)

Ella May's ballads recreate an experience where both women share grief in losing their children to hunger and disease because they could not afford medical care. Page refers to the parallel "natures" of Marge and Ella May that draw them into a deeper friendship, implying the nature of a maternal bond through the positioning of Ella May's children at their feet. The bond between the women is illustrated further during the union rallies when Marge tends to the children while Ella May sings the ballad of the mill mothers, who know, "...it is for our dear children/That seem to us so dear" (336). When the crowd calls for more ballads, Ella May tells her audience to "stick to" the Union, then defers to her comrade and friend, Marge Crenshaw. Marge ascends to the platform with her militant message, "What's happened to me is the same as what's happen to us all...The mill takes all, 'n gives nothin... It took my youth, it took my babies. It took my man. One thing it can't take—that's my fightin' spirit" (336). The voices of Ella May and Marge Crenshaw are melded into one maternal voice of solidarity.

In fictionalizing the life of Ella May Wiggins, Page positions Marge as witness to the first real-life threat upon the lives of May and her children and reveals a part of Gastonia's story that that was not known to the general public. Communist organizer Vera Buch Weisboard remembers the threat in her biography, "[t]here had been an attempt to poison Mrs. Wiggins' water supply. She lived with her children in a little shack at the outskirts of town, getting water from a nearby spring. That morning the water looked blue and had a chemical smell" (218). Weisboard states that none of Wiggins family had drunk the water; however in Page's version, the family drinks the water and is rescued by Marge. When Ella May misses a union meeting, Marge walks three miles to discover "all five huddled together in one bed" with Ella May revealing, "The low-downs pizened us!" The dialogue is interrupted by Page's narration of Marge's thoughts, "The comp'ny stop at nothin'—nuthin', Even murder" (338). Page confirms

the poisoning: “[w]hen the sample of the water was tested it proved to be strongly polluted with a poisonous acid” (339). Although there does not appear to be any mention of the poisoning incident in any other historical reports or in the correspondence of those were in Gastonia at the time of the strike, there is little reason to doubt Weisbord’s later account of the incident. Page’s fictional representation, however bears testimony to the actual persecution of a poor white southern woman whose maternal activism challenged the boundaries of class, gender, and race.

Page also recreates the raid on the supply store and the murder of Gastonia’s police chief prior to the murder of Ella May. Marge, along with her brother and other strikers, are charged with the murder of the police chief. When public outcry demands the release of the women from jail out of “southern chivalry,” Marge responds, “I know their chivalry! . . . I’ve been visited with more’n seventeen years of it, eleven hours a day...southern chivalry! Look what it does for colored women!” (358). Marge’s gendered response encompasses her years of working at the mill under a paternalistic system that claims a gallant and courtly treatment of women. In addition to voicing her own resentment, Marge attacks the years of southern tradition that sustained racial bigotry against her African American sisters.

Marge is released from prison in time to join Ella May on the fateful journey to the union rally in Charlotte. Page alters historical fact by placing Wiggins’ children in the truck under the shared care of Marge and their mother. When the truck stops, an unknown assailant fires into the crowd of women and children, and Ella May is shot. Page draws upon the gendered identity of the dying woman as a maternal martyr with the presence of her grieving child. Page writes, “As she fell, baby Ike ran to her, crying, ‘Mama’s hurted. Mama’s hurted’.” Locating baby Ike at the center of the violence emphasizes May’s maternal motives as well as her maternal martyrdom. Marge’s presence is also dramatically revealed as one maternal body cradling the martyred

maternal body: “Marge held her friend’s head in her lap while the men struggled to right the truck” (360). Although Marge and two other witnesses identify the murderer, the similarity of the fictionalized and the real events in real Gastonia leaves the case un-prosecuted. Page’s protagonist promises the Wiggins children that she will “try to raise [them] the way Ella May’d want,” but the children are quickly removed by the state. The matron of the orphans’ home states, “We’ll not allow those Bolsheviks ’n free lovers to keep you.” Despite the attack on Marge’s morality, Page affirms Marge’s maternal rights with the union lawyer’s assurances: “You’ve no legal claim to the children, though every moral one” (361).

With the death of Ella May and the removal of May’s children, Marge is again, thrust back into the role of maternal activist. The strike ends and Marge joins her brother for a convention in the North. Although some critics believe that in removing her protagonist from Gastonia, Page abandons the union cause, Marge’s journey north suggests the mirroring the educational opportunity that was provided for her brother, Tom. Like her brother, with adequate training, Marge can return as a maternal activist and union organizer. Page hints at this return when Tom introduces his wife and Fred Morgan and tells Marge, “When we go back they’ll head with us—South” (368).

In Cleveland, Page reinforces Marge’s link to working-class women through maternal solidarity. Marge listens to the testimonials of social injustice on a larger scale from other maternal voices. When she arrives, she sees a child “fumbling for its mother’s breast” and hears the mother whisper to her infant “in some language Marge couldn’t understand” (377). Marge makes note of the infant’s fragility and the willingness of the mother to make the journey for the sake of her child’s future. She holds the baby of a miner’s wife from Pennsylvania and hears the mother’s sad story of the neglect of her “children with no shoes, nothing.” She hears that “[t]he

miners and their women are making ready to march again” (371). The mothers march in union solidarity because they believe that the union brings gender equality along with fair wages and working conditions. Tom’s wife tells Marge that in Russia, “working women get two months’ vacation with pay before ’n two months after child-birth, free care at the hospital” and Marge imagines that “someday life on Riverton hill would be like that...Folks like her running the factories, folks like her making the laws” (372). Page posits the tenets of her socialist ideology and her vision of a better world in the mind of protagonist with a working-class identity of “folks like her.”

Despite its literary flaws, *Gathering Storm: A Story of the Black Belt* is a story of the experiences of people like Ella May, Marge Crenshaw, Martha Morgan, and countless other working-class women. Page’s story extends beyond the geographical boundaries of the events in North Carolina to a world of revolutionary events that drew attention to issues of gender, race, and class. Page believed that she created *Gathering Storm* from her “experiences of life” (Baker 116). As a mother, a wife, and a loyal member of the Communist Party, she took her jobs seriously and delivered the tenets of her socialist ideology in the form of a novel depicting maternal activism as a viable model for social change. Marge mirrors Page’s belief in the Communist Party and prepares to participate actively in a collective society that places no boundaries on race, gender, or class. At the end of *Gathering Storm*, Page implies that Marge, inspired by her maternal activism, will return to the South. Together with her brother, they will fight for radical reform with a legacy of maternal activism that was inspired years before by their grandmother’s, and perhaps Page’s grandmother’s, “fightin’ spirit.” Page affirms her vision of a leadership role for women in the final paragraph of the novel where Marge’s return as a maternal

activist is implied as she actively rides “the gale! Not swept along, but deliberately, joyously a fore-runner, a marshaller of the gathering storm” (374).

CHAPTER 5
OLIVE TILFORD DARGAN: A VIVID RED MATERNAL VISION IN *CALL HOME THE HEART*

Envisioning Vivid Red

Sixty-six year old Kentucky-born, playwright and poet, Olive Tilford Dargan, chose the male pen name of Fielding Burke and emerged from the North Carolina hills to create her 1932 version of Ella May Wiggins as a working-class maternal heroine in *Call Home the Heart*. In *Call Home the Heart*, the maternal body of Ella May Wiggins represents and reveals the material reality of the working-class poor of the Appalachian South where the social practices associated with mothering are critical for understanding how the social consciousness of a single individual inspires collective activism. Dargan's characterization of Wiggins invokes and revises maternal tradition as the shared care taking experience of women to engage her readers in a communal sense of working-class consciousness. Dargan's fictional Wiggins, married and visibly pregnant, leaves her husband and son to seek something beyond "work and dirt and younguns" (49). Although Ishma Waycaster evolves as a political activist in Gastonia, Dargan returns her to the mountains armed with a new sense of community identity and a maternal vision for the future.

Dargan also left her rural southern roots for the educational and career opportunities in New York and London, but by age thirty-five, Dargan's heart was also called home to the hills of North Carolina. Similar to her protagonist's quest for self-fulfillment, Dargan also takes a hiatus from her husband as she journeys toward her identity as a writer and as an activist. Throughout her novel, Dargan's political voice emerges as a voice of experiential knowledge where she not only wrote about Wiggins, but she also chose to live with and write about the rural working-class community in the Appalachian Mountains. This chapter briefly traces the life experiences that inform Dargan's writing and follow her toward her fictional creation of Ella May Wiggins. The

balance of the chapter will focus upon the rural and urban experiences of Dargan's protagonist, Ishma Waycaster, and her journey toward an emancipatory vision of maternal solidarity which led her to return to her home in the Southern Appalachian Mountains.

Born in rural Kentucky to abolitionist parents in 1869, Dargan and her three siblings were raised with a sense of political consciousness and self-sufficiency. In the republication of *Call Home the Heart*, by Feminist Press, Anna W. Shannon's Biographical Afterword points toward an early incident in Dargan's childhood where she begins to express her sense of a maternal-based social consciousness. When she read of a baby being born in a state prison in St. Louis, the eleven year old, feeling that her pleas for social justice fell upon her father's deaf ears, composed a suffrage-based song as an attempt to convince her father of his power to intercede for a helpless child whose fate was so closely linked to her mother's (434). Dargan's early sense of social justice matured and developed. In addition to the feminist views revealed in her poetry, plays, and fiction, Dargan was also a prolific letter writer who corresponded with many other political radicals who shared her radical perceptions. However, out of fear for political persecution, biographers report that Dargan had ordered the destruction of most of her correspondence. In her biographical study, Anna Shannon notes that the gaps and inconsistencies in Dargan's biographical record may be attributed to Dargan, herself, who "may have conspired in the destruction of the evidence of her political activities and contacts during two of the periods of political repression through which she lived" (433). Although much of her personal correspondence was destroyed in fires occurring in 1919 and in 1924 as well as during the Red Scare of the 1950s, the papers that were treasured and saved offer striking evidence of Dargan's feminist activism. Dargan's feminist correspondence reveals her relationships with other feminist voices. Shannon describes these supportive relationships as, "a network of women providing one

another with their primary source of identity and energy” (434). The voices of Dargan’s supportive network included feminists like: Rose Pastor Stokes, a fellow socialist and one of the founding members of the American Communist Party, Alice Stone Blackwell, daughter of women’s rights pioneer, Lucy Stone, and Anne Whitney, a lesbian sculptor. Although fear of political persecution led Dargan to destroy most of the evidence of her feminist and leftist leanings, it appears that the correspondence from a network of women that was protected and preserved as a connection to a community of women who understood and shared the same political consciousness. In *Call Home the Heart*, Dargan voices her heartfelt feminist and leftist politics through her protagonist, Ishma Waycaster, who resists political repression. Ishma’s voice is not a singular voice, but rather she represents the solidarity among women, like Dargan’s community of women, who understood the urgent need for social reform.

Dargan’s feminist consciousness was also a product of maternal influence. At age eleven, when her mother’s health deteriorated to the point of debilitation, Dargan was thrust into maturity and took her mother’s place at her father’s academy. By age fourteen, she was teaching independently at a neighboring school. Stepping into her mother’s professional responsibilities affected Dargan’s sense of identity as a woman and years later, Dargan’s correspondence reveals her empathy for her mother as a woman who suffered a “broken, unfinished life” (qtd. in Shannon, Biographical 434). Dargan later earned her teaching certification at Peabody Normal School in Nashville and then earned the money to attend Radcliffe College by working in various teaching positions in Missouri and Texas. Dargan was in her late twenties and attending Radcliffe when she met and married a Harvard graduate, Pegram Dargan. When her husband’s health began to deteriorate, Dargan’s success as a playwright enabled her to return to purchase a farm in North Carolina in 1906. Shortly after leaving New York, Dargan discovered she was

pregnant. Close to age forty and fearing complications, she left her husband behind in the Carolina Hills and spent the summer in Caritas Island off the coast of Stamford, Connecticut in the home of a friend from her days at Radcliffe, Rose Pastor Stokes. Dargan's unplanned pregnancy resulted in the birth of a premature infant daughter, who only survived for two hours, in May of 1907. Shannon's biographical study reveals that her Dargan's summer with Stokes not only helped her to heal physically, but it also strongly influenced Dargan's Socialist politics (Biographical 437).

Dargan returned to the farm in North Carolina in the fall of 1907 and remained with her husband until 1911 when she made her solo trip to England to write and produce another play and a book of poetry. While in England, Dargan's letters to Alice Stone Blackwell, editor of the *Woman's Journal*, reported the violence erupting from the British women's suffrage movement. Dargan also recounted the fate of the hundreds children who were dying in the slums of London and their striking working-class mothers who claim they preferred starvation to "bringing up children to be slaves like themselves" (Shannon, Introduction x-xvi). With Britain entering WWI, Dargan returned to New York in 1914. Following the death of her husband in 1915, Dargan returned permanently to the South Carolina mountains. By the time Dargan had returned home, WWI had sparked a textile boom in the Piedmont region, but the boom ended with the end of the war. The decrease in wages and working conditions sparked a wave of industrial strife that shattered the lives of the working-class for the next decade. Living in the heart of the Southern Piedmont, Dargan experienced both the boom and the bust of the textile industry. For Dargan, the mountains were not only a place to call home, but also a place beset by exploitive industrialization and in need of radical social change. In a letter to her friend, Dargan implied that leftist ideology inspired her vision of social change. Dargan claimed she was "perusing the

Daily Worker regularly and assiduously" and that she was "still vivid red" (Shannon, Biographical 440). Although Dargan never officially joined the Communist Party, her home in Asheville was frequently a site of clandestine meetings (Lane 96). As a woman of leftist leanings, Dargan's sense of class consciousness was part of a collective identity that extended to the caretaking of her family, her friends, and her community.

By 1929, Dargan's vivid red social consciousness drew her to the strike in Gastonia because she felt a kinship with female strikers who left the mountain to find self-sufficiency in the mills and instead, found exploitation and deprivation. The women from rural Appalachia were very similar to the women Dargan met in London; both were desperately struggling for economic survival and fearing that they were reproducing children who were destined to a life of virtual slavery. Dargan not only recognized the problem, but she also witnessed how workers could be drawn into solidarity and how most women, whether or not they were mothers, felt committed to what Dargan refers to as, "the right of every child to be 'born with a chance'" (qtd. in Shannon, Introduction xix). In Gastonia, Dargan witnessed the same passionate concern for the children of the textile workers. Dargan's version of Gastonia is a vivid red version of working-class solidarity where the maternal body of Dargan's fictionalized Ella May Wiggins evolves as a political body who creates a model of social reform that would not only benefit the mothers, but would also benefit the children who represented the future of the working-class.

In *Call Home the Heart*, Dargan calls for an alternative vision of working-class solidarity as well as an alternative version of the events at Gastonia. Rather than punishing her protagonist for her abandonment of her marital obligation or for her involvement with the Communist Party by killing her for her immoral transgressions, Dargan's alternative version restores the fictional Ella May Wiggins to the maternal embrace of the mountain. In the mountains, both Ishma and

her collective vision are reborn as the revolutionary solidarity of both the women of the mountains and the women of the mills. Dargan, like the other Gastonia authors, could not tell the story of mill at Gastonia without telling the story of the mountain. Nor could she tell the story of the mountain without telling the story of the women whose shared nascent desire for self-sufficiency that not only drives them into the mills, but also drives them toward the collective maternal vision of giving their children a chance at a better life. In Dargan's vision of maternal solidarity, her fictional Ella May Wiggins is not murdered in Gastonia. Rather, the fictionalized Wiggins, Ishma Waycaster, survives and experiences a metaphorical rebirth which allows her to return to the mountains with a maternal-based model of working-class consciousness and feminist social reform.

An Inheritance of Maternal Resistance

In *Call Home the Heart*, Ishma Waycaster's early indoctrination into maternal responsibility bears testimony to the ever constant struggle for basic survival among the women within the Depression era Appalachian South. The maternal role of women, as defined by Dargan's protagonist, reflects the material reality of women in the rural mountains as "work and dirt and younguns" (49). Ishma's resistance to work and children is rooted in her material reality. In the mountains of Southern Appalachia, neither the dirt, nor the work, produced even the most basic needs for human survival and the children starved. The material reality within the textile mills was not far removed from that of the mountains; no matter how hard women worked, their hard work reaped no more benefit than it did in the mountains and again, the children still starved. Although the women of the mountains and of the mills were trapped in their reproductive roles, they still believed that if they worked long enough and hard enough, they could save their offspring as well as themselves from becoming slaves to the same system. A

maternal desire for a better life legitimizes female participation in working-class resistance to capitalist oppression.

Dargan introduces her fictional Ella May Wiggins as someone with working-class burdens: “Before she was seven, Ishma, the youngest child of Marshall and Laviny Waycaster, had joined the class of burden-bearers” (1). Although Dargan’s “class” can be read as working-class, it also metaphorically represents Ishma’s gendered role as a class of women who bear a dual labor that is both productive and reproductive. As a female child, Ishma is “a family possession, giving herself so effectually that no one suspected she was giving” (1). As part of a traditional patriarchal family, Ishma is owned by her family until she is passed to another family through marriage. As a family possession, she is expected to labor in the fields as well as in the home. Dargan establishes Ishma as a hard worker whose gendered tasks bear a direct relationship to the maternal responsibility of taking care of the family. Dargan contrasts Ishma’s competency in caretaking with her sister, Bainie who, at the opening of the novel is described as “the wearily incompetent mother of four children” (11). As Bainie adds to her brood with a yearly pregnancy, Ishma’s burdens increase in both food production and in the maternal care taking an ever expanding family.

Unlike the children she tends, Ishma’s role in the family subordinates her educational development and she gleans intellectual enrichment through her maternal task of helping children with their homework and reading the textbooks that her charges cast aside. By the time Ishma is twelve, the school master confronts her mother, Laviny, demanding to know why Ishma is not attending school. Laviny explains that Ishma “took keer o’ Baine’s younguns sence she’s five year old” (11). Laviny’s boast of Ishma’s competency reflects the pride that her mother feels with her daughter’s sense of shared maternal responsibility as well revealing as the

developmental cost of Ishma's gendered labor. The sympathetic school master leaves a parting gift of a subscription to a magazine, *Women at Home*. With Ishma's intellectual development subordinated to the maternal work of caring for her sister's children and the farm work, Dargan posits a sense of maternal commitment as the foundation of revolutionary political development. Ishma does not resist bearing the physical burdens of communal cooperation because she identifies with generations of rural women who effectively give of themselves in order for their families to survive. The futility of her labor and her lack of intellectual stimulation fuels Ishma's resentment and anger.

Dargan depicts rural subsistence survival as more difficult for a mountain woman's because yearly child bearing adds to her burdens. Yet, as each year adds one more hungry mouth to feed at a time when there is not enough corn meal for the existing children, women lament the lack of bread, not the presence of children. Ishma's sense of responsibility toward childcare and the resistance to childbearing are survival skills learned from her maternal grandmother, Sara Starkweather. Although Dargan reveals Sarah Starkweather's death in the first chapter of the novel, her frequent appearances throughout the novel occur as a legacy of oral history and maternal wisdom narrated through Ishma's social consciousness. Dargan describes Granny Starkweather's skills at both maternal nurturance and maternal resistance as a "preference for ready-mades, and [a] long escape from maternity" (4). In this description of Granny Starkweather, Dargan attempts to reconcile the contradiction between a rural tradition where fecundity was a source of pride as well as a material reality where the yearly production of an infant contributed to the increase of poverty.

Granny's role both embraces the burden of maternal caretaking and resists the reproductive imperative of maternity. Along with the care of her great grandchildren and her grandchildren,

Granny nurtured her own brood that consisted of a total of seventeen stepchildren which resulted from two marriages to two widowers and the deaths of two women worn from “pioneering and child birthing” (4). Sarah Starkweather’s preference for stepchildren reinforces the rural tradition of large families, but also implies a conscious resistance to the same imposed biological maternity that took the life of her predecessors. Sarah’s “escape” from her reproductive destiny is not absolute and at age forty-one, Sarah bears one male child, John, who dies at age 19 after fathering Ishma’s mother, Laviny. With the birth of only one son to maintain the Starkweather family lineage, Sarah Starkweather’s long life span of one hundred and seven years can be attributed to her resistance of the physical burden of yearly childbirth. Dargan implies a maternal bond between Granny Starkweather and Ishma in, “Granny detected in the last little girl a strong resemblance to herself” and “Ishma had the joy of knowing she pleased her grandmother” (6). Ishma’s pleasing resemblance to Granny plays out in the novel as maternal solidarity, in tending mothers and children and confronting the issue of birth control, and in Ishma’s socially conscious vocational aspiration of nurturing “ready made” children in a communal farm.

After Granny’s death, Dargan maintains the generational bond between the spirit of Sarah Starkweather and her great granddaughter through Granny’s handmade quilt. Granny’s quilt represents a connection between Ishma, her grandmother, and her female community. Ishma wraps herself within her grandmother’s quilt at times when she needs support or when she requires a cloak of female resistance. In her contemporary study of regional writing, Cecelia Conway asserts that the images of quilts in female-authored fiction represent a women’s view of community as parts of the whole working together (138). Dargan’s fictional quilt signifies a recorded history where knowledge and traditions are passed down through generations of women who work together in a community of women. Sarah Starkweather bestows her best handmade

quilt upon Ishma for the child's tenth birthday. The hand-made quilt is a female symbol of the productive labor of women as well as representing reproductive labor in creating the fabric of the family. With all of Granny's other worldly possessions passed on to her step children, the quilt is Granny's final remaining treasure and cements Ishma's sense of identity as an extension of her grandmother's identity. Granny predicts that Ishma will "keep that quilt sweet" and that "[i]t'll last her fer weddin'bed" (3).

However, after Granny's death, Ishma resists Granny's domestic ideal and rather than storing the quilt away in a hope chest as part of her dowry, Ishma chooses to use the quilt to cover the bed that offers a "happy alternative to sleeping with three of her sister's younguns" (3). While Ishma basks in the memory of her grandmother and in the collective labor that supports the production of the quilt from singular patches of fabric, the quilt also supports a brief respite for Ishma's care taking role for Bainie's children. Ishma also resists in sharing the quilt and her bed with a husband. Dargan illustrates Ishma's first act of resistance as a project of building a separate bed for herself apart from the family burdens and apart from marital burdens. As a nurturing symbol of the spiritual bond between Granny and Ishma, the quilt represents a bond of female community as well as an act of gendered resistance that will play out in the novel as vision of maternal solidarity and self-sufficiency.

Marital Resistance and Material Reality

Ishma's dream of emancipation is subverted by her material reality and her sense of obligation as primary care taker of her family. Dargan describes Ishma's collective sense of duty as, "[t]he girl was almost single-handed in her struggle to make the farm keep them all decently alive" (13). Clearly, Ishma is the sole support of the family farm. Her mother's greatest fear for the family's survival is expressed by Lavinia in, "If Ishma left the mountain, how could the family go on without her? Nine to eat from one meal barrel, and only Ishma to fill it!" (46).

Laviny recognizes that Ishma is the only one in the family whose hard work and determination will guarantee their survival. Yet, the paternal traditions of Southern Appalachia affect Ishma's position and her perception of self worth within the family. Although Jim Wishart mirrors his wife, Bainie's incompetency, Laviny still establishes his paternal privilege over the family. When Jim sells Ishma's cow without her permission, Laviny reminds Ishma of her traditional female role, "You know Jim. An' you know you kain't do a pinched-off speck 'about anything he does" (46). Rural tradition dictates that Jim's position as the patriarchal authority cannot be challenged. Ishma clearly bears the burden of the family's survival, yet bears no acknowledgment from the family who depends upon the value of her labor.

By age eighteen, Ishma is of traditional marriageable age and Dargan provides two suitors, both of which Ishma chooses to initially reject because she knows that again, she will be a possession whose burdens will increased further with yearly reproduction. When Britt Hensley proposes marriage, Ishma responds, "You think I'm going into that [marriage] with Bainie and her kids right before my eyes?" (37). When Rad Bailey proposes, Ishma replies, "Why does everybody think a girl's got to marry? I'm going to have something else. . . It ought'nt to be all work and dirt and younguns." When Bailey presses for an answer as to what the "something else" may be, Ishma can only reply, "I don't know" (48-49). Having never been outside the Southern Appalachians, Ishma has no concept of life beyond her reproductive destiny and her rural privation. Her only view of the life beyond the mountain comes from glimpses of *Woman at Home*, that "opened gates to a way of living...that it seemed nothing short of celestial to Ishma" (11). Ishma's desire for emancipation is, however, overshadowed by patriarchal tradition.

Ishma's choice of a husband hinges on her maternal desire and taking care of her family. When Britt Henley gallantly returns the cow that brother-in-law Jim had sold without Ishma's

permission and seamlessly fills in for Jim's lack of skill at the plow on the Waycaster farm, he emerges as the best choice for Ishma. Although Dargan creates a true love for her protagonist, she does not omit the harsh poverty of rural existence and she foreshadows the effect of poverty upon the tradition of marriage. Dargan describes the relationship between Ishma and Britt as "laughing and loving each other as if poverty had no grip on their happiness" (64). However, before long, Ishma and Britt discover that poverty does indeed have a grip on their happiness. The population of the small two-room cabin grows to twelve people and the profit from the crops cannot not match the debt at the local store, let alone allow the newlyweds to build their own cabin. Although Dargan appears to foreground the love relationship, poverty establishes its grip of the newlyweds by silencing their laughter and overshadowing their happiness by trapping them into a daily struggle for survival. Within the year, Ishma's pregnancy adds another burden to her burden of taking care of the younguns' and the dirt of the Waycaster farm.

Through Ishma's experiences of parturition and birth, Dargan illustrates how, in the Southern Appalachian mountains, a woman's life is circumscribed by her reproductive destiny as well as subordinated to her material reality. As the time for Ishma's parturition approaches, the cramped quarters of the small cabin crush Ishma's spirit as well as her body. Ishma's maternal labor and birth process, however, is inconsequential and illustrated through the matriarchal spatial position held by her mother. Rather than receiving maternal caretaking from her mother, Ishma receives a stark reminder of her position within a female class whose lived experience of childbirth was daily routine. Ishma "wanted Laviny to give up her bed in the middle room and let her be sick there, but her mother said there was no use beginning to humor her, she'd have to get used to things like any married woman" (78). As a married woman who had also born children in yearly cycles, Ishma's mother demonstrates a clear understanding of the cyclic reproductive fate

of her daughter. The everyday routine “things” that Ishma will have to get “used to” include seven of her sister’s children running around a two-room cabin while she labors to give birth to yet another child who will also occupy the same space.

Ishma’s labor and delivery are silenced by her mother’s decree, and the event of Ishma’s labor and delivery is effaced by the daily activities of her entire extended family. The children are sent outside to play, but Bainie argues that she “kain’t sent them back [with] the air hangin’ with ice.” So, the children return and play noisily in the kitchen. At the same time, her husband is enraged by the fact that he is powerless in any attempt to comfort his wife, so “Britt went up to the barn where he could swear unimpeded” (78). The appearance of her infant son immediately follows the spatial dislocations of the family members and Laviny admitting, “Ned was the finest baby that had ever come into the family” (78). Although the birth occurs without any narration of Ishma’s labor or delivery, the presence of the family within the over crowded cabin represents a long and difficult birth process. Ishma does not express any maternal joy at having one more mouth to feed or more diapers to wash. Ishma’s emotional state is aligned with the repression of her birthing event as a sense of entrapment where, “Life, the future, her plans, were not so clear as they had been. She felt mentally clamped down, in the way that she had felt physically cramped the night Ned was born” (78). Dargan illustrates how her protagonist is not only restricted by her reproductive body, but she is also restricted by the physical and emotional constraints of her material reality.

Despite Ishma’s protestations against producing yet another child, within two years after delivering her son, she births twins. Ishma’s twins die before they are a year old in a flu epidemic. After the death of the twins, Ishma’s reproductive destiny strikes another blow to her body. As drought, fire, sickness, and pestilence continue to smite the farm, the debts continue to

rise and Ishma's memories of her previous birthing events in the cramped quarters of the cabin fuels her resentment. Dargan personifies the cabin, in fact, as a demanding child in, "It began to oppress her with its own claims to dirt and disorder...She couldn't be sick in that room again" (147). The yearly pregnancies represent an economic illness which gestates within the maternal body of Ishma and births a working-class rage against her rural privation.

Ishma's brother Steve thwarts her first attempt to leave the mountain. In contrast to his sister, Steve successfully escapes Cloudy Knob early in the novel returning only long enough to articulate the rhetoric of religious rural tradition and the patriarchal ideology of female subjection. Ishma, two years younger than Steve, begs, "I've got to get off of this mountain." Steve reminds Ishma she is constrained by the burden of her reproductive destiny. He warns, "Nobody wants a woman in your fix, Ish...A woman's a woman. She's bound to carry the baggage in this life...God, or Nature, or something we kain't buck against, has fixed it that way" (149). However, Ishma does not believe that her destiny is "fixed" by her pregnancy or by a patriarchal God. Granny Starkweather had cautioned Ishma long ago that the contradictions in the Bible were a result of patriarchal design, "set down by men. . . . Sometimes they didn't know no better" (66). Dargan risks a critique of patriarchal religious tradition by allowing her protagonist to resist her brother's arguments of reproductive biology and spiritual morality when faced with an opportunity for escape.

Dargan represents the opportunity for escape as an economic vision in the middle of night when Rad Bailey stood before Ishma and held up his bank-book to prove he had four-hundred dollars and was leaving Cloudy Knob to a place where "men must see clearly" (153). Ishma decides that the poverty of mountains has also clouded her vision and, like Rad, the urban mill town offered hope of something "celestial" that she saw in her magazine. Although Ishma still

has no answer to Rad's question of what more could a woman want besides marriage, her desire for "something else" clearly extends beyond the mountain's boundaries. All Ishma has experienced thus far has been the burdens of poverty and procreation. Her search for something else, however, is still predicated upon an experiential knowledge steeped in the patriarchal tradition of marriage where a female is subordinated by her reproductive body and her economic dependency upon a male provider.

Conversely, Rad views his bank-book as the evidence of his position as a provider of economic security in the face of Ishma's rural poverty. Although Ishma had rejected his first formal proposal of marriage, Rad believes that his promise of economic security guarantees Ishma's acceptance of his second proposal. Despite the impending birth of another man's child, Rad embraces Ishma's reproductive body as part of his own paternal ideal of possessing a wife and family and fulfilling the traditional role of provider. Rad does not view Ishma's pregnancy as being in a "fix." Rather, Ishma's obvious fecundity confirms future heirs affirming his own sense of paternal tradition. Rad promises, "I'll be good to you—an' the baby that's comin'" (156). Rad's position of provider allows him to defeat Britt as his rival and reclaim the woman who refused his first proposal of marriage.

However, Ishma views Rad's offer as the only means of escaping her material reality rather than a marital commitment. Dargan illustrates how Rad's body ceases to exist as a desired lover and becomes an instrument of escape. Dargan illustrates Ishma's emancipatory vision with, "[t]he wall has a gate. Here was a way to open it." At that moment Rad is not a human being, but an economic force that will guarantee her survival until she can work to earn her own cash. Burke continues with, "He was a friendly force who would help her turn the lock and let her pass

out” (155). As a way to open the gate to her freedom, Rad represents an economic force that is spatially outside of the rural privation which oppresses Ishma.

Ishma’s escape with Rad requires bartering with the only commodity that she possesses, her body. Ishma’s body is both sexualized as a female body and desexualized as a maternal body. The pregnancy of Dargan’s protagonist dismisses any sexualized motive for leaving the mountain. Ishma’s sexual dislocation is illustrated in, “She had forgotten her own body; and if she could have remembered it, she would have held insignificant anything that could be done to it (155-56). Ishma subordinates her sexual desire to her intellectual desire. Although Dargan deflects the criticism of Ishma's morality with a symbolic maternal condition, her material condition contradicts the patriarchal maternal ideal and implies that Ishma is only trading one form of prostitution for another. Dargan reveals her protagonist’s acute awareness of her body as a valuable possession that can be bartered and implies that the price of freedom is only an exchange of commodities: “Whatever its value, she knew it could not be worth the price she had paid; the price which she never would get through paying” (179). Although Ishma’s body is commodified and rural religious tradition will exact a price on morality, her second attempt to escape her rural constraints succeeds.

Maternal Solidarity in a Celestial Dystopia

Dargan introduces her fictional Gastonia as a chapter heading, “The Big Happy World,” but despite its literal promise of happiness, patriarchal tradition and poverty cast their shadows over Ishma’s celestial vision. Although Rad Bailey keeps his promise as a provider and his bankbook provides a comfortable security in Winbury, Ishma’s individual desire for something better leads her toward the development of a communal desire to better the lives of the women and children of Winbury. Just as Rad’s bankbook raises Ishma’s standard of living, a maternal body bears the burden of blame when the standard of living is lowered for the family whose

house on the verge of foreclosure. The dispossessed family of Pace Unthank rents a room from Rad and Ishma and the income provided from the rent pays for Ishma and Rad's living expenses. Along with providing a home for two families, this familiar communal living arrangement with the Unthank family bears a strong resemblance to the shared cabin in Cloudy Knob where patriarchal privilege reigns and Ishma becomes the maternal caretaker.

Like any married couple from the hill country, Rad now assumes the role as head of the household and manages the household accounts while Ishma tends the domestic space. Unlike the houses surrounding it, Rad takes exceptional pride in the house he acquired from Genie and Pace Unthank because it "possessed such luxuries as water, lights and sewerage, to which Rad, with pride and frequency, called to Ishma's attention" (178). Rad's prideful and frequent reminders reinforce Ishma's indebtedness as well as imply her sexual subordination to Rad. In addition to patriarchal privilege, "big happy world" of Winbury also shares another striking similarity to Cloudy Knob; maternal bodies also bear the same burden of blame for the economic privation in the mill village as they do in the rural mountains where babies appear in yearly cycles:

Pace Unthank was a good workman badly handicapped by a sick wife. Her invalidism was due to rapid child-bearing, and the husband, generous enough to admit his responsibility, put up complaisantly with slovenly cooking and a brazenly untidy house. Ishma silently busied herself with setting the place in order, and after a few days the two families were taking their meals together. (179)

The world of Winbury is no happier than the world of Cloudy Knob because babies are still produced yearly, still contribute to the deterioration of the family economy, and still result in the physical deterioration of the maternal body. However, in Winbury, the maternal body is also a working-class wage-earning body. The economic instability of Pace Unthank's family is attributed to Genie's deteriorating health, rather than to Pace's wage earning work as a provider. Pace's wife's inability to work, whether work is defined as outside or as inside the home, is

caused by frequent childbirth. Dargan illustrates the impact of pregnancy upon the female body through the body of Pace's wife and the deterioration of the female domestic space. The "generous" understanding of Pace Unthank underscores his admittance of male responsibility for her post-partum complications while emphasizing the gendered division of labor where pregnancy and childbirth and the caretaking of the home are traditionally assigned as feminine duties. Again, Ishma gives herself effectually and demonstrates that generous understanding is an act maternal solidarity. Maternal solidarity lies in the hands of Ishma, who in her pregnant condition, immediately begins caring for Genie Unthank and setting the shared domestic space in order and taking command of the kitchen.

Ishma's empathetic act of maternal solidarity in Genie's post partum care, is reciprocated with another act of maternal solidarity, the sharing of birth control information. Dargan confronts patriarchal tradition by asserting a radically progressive topic when in most states, any information about any method of birth control was considered illegal. Ishma's introduction to this life-saving knowledge is acquired through eaves dropping on a conversation about birth control between the radical physician, Derry Unthank, and Pace and Genie Unthank. While in the kitchen, Ishma hears the doctor's threatening prediction that if Pace's wife is afflicted with another pregnancy, "Genie will be dead in six months, or in Morganton" (181). Ishma is shocked because she understands that pregnancy as inevitable and believes that the doctor is "indecent" for even broaching the topic. Ishma is also aware that Morganton is a hospital for the insane. After the birth of her infant daughter, Vennie, Ishma reconsiders her initial self-righteous indignation and seeks an ally in Genie. With her nursing infant at her breast and tears in her eyes, Ishma presses for clarification of the knowledge that can only be whispered and asks Genie, "I want to ask you something, Genie, and don't you get mad at me, because it may mean whether

I'm going to live or die." Genie's response and Ishma's acceptance is narrated succinctly with, "She told. Ishma kept silent" (194). Both women understand the gravity of the question of birth control as a matter of life or death affecting both the physical and emotional health of the maternal body and they share a sense of solidarity in challenging their biological imperatives. Dargan's heroine is no older than twenty-five and she listens silently and intently because the birth of Vennie mirrors her experience of birthing three children in four years in the mountains of Cloudy Knob. Through their conscious concern for each other, Ishma and Genie are united in maternal solidarity and risk speaking the unspeakable.

Ishma and Genie press the boundaries of patriarchal dominion even further and conspire in a plan to encourage Genie's to pass birth control information on to Rad. The conversation between the two men, like the conversation between the two women, is outside of the narrative. However, the need for the conversation is written as a challenge to patriarchal privilege. Dargan confronts male privilege when Rad asks Pace what Dr. Unthank meant: "Whad he mean? I'm on probation? . . . A man's got to have his rights" (196). Dargan's feminist condemnation of Rad's implied sexual privilege is answered by Pace Unthank's retort: "Yes, I had my rights, and see what happened. I lost my house, I nearly lost my wife, and if you hadn't come along with a little cash my family would have been in the street. If that's where having' your rights brings you, I'd rather do without 'em" (196). Dargan suggests a revolutionary social transformation that challenges the patriarchal structure and the sexualized "rights" of a husband over his wife by equating the emotional loss with the economic loss. At the same time, through female solidarity, Dargan implies a victory for women's rights over their reproductive destinies.

Again, Dargan locates Ishma and Genie, in a feminine space of domain, the kitchen. The secret knowledge is again a silent implication, but affirmed by the women who now have control

their reproductive destinies in, “They knew what Pace had to say to Rad” (196). Ishma’s first lesson in the big happy world is a lesson in how to control the reproductive destiny that circumscribes her world. Sylvia Cook argues that this moment within the novel “allowed [Ishma’s] intellect a clear triumph over her instinct” (449). At the same time, Dargan illustrates how a woman’s life is circumscribed by her reproductive capability. In providing her protagonist with the knowledge that allows her to separate her sexual desire from her reproductive destiny, Dargan also implies that birth control has a direct link to the economic destinies of both women and men and needs to be a viable part of revolutionary social reform.

Along with his radical knowledge of birth control as revolutionary ideology, many critics argue that Dargan’s physician, Dr. Unthank, acts as a mentor character for Ishma’s political development by providing “the right kind of books” and “a look in on Karl Marx” (203). Although Unthank shares his leftist ideology, he does not share the knowledge of birth control with Ishma. Rather, Ishma acquires the secret from another maternal body who shares the lived experience as well as the knowledge. While Unthank may possess the privileged theories, Ishma’s maternal experience reflects revolutionary praxis. Contemporary historian, Barbara Foley contends that as a mentor, Unthank plays an influential role in Ishma’s political development. Foley argues that although Unthank “chides Ishma for her backward ideas and steadily pushes her leftward,” he also gains insight from Ishma and “the proletarian pupil ends up teaching the middleclass mentor” (Foley 334). While Dr. Derry Unthank influences Ishma’s leftist leanings through his Marxist literature, Dargan suggests his distance from political activism in “Derry didn’t go often to Winbury...it used him up” (189). Dr. Unthank’s sporadic appearances in the novel illustrate that when the physician was not available, the women of

Winbury return to their lived experience in the mountains, unite in maternal solidarity, and take over the care of those struggling for life.

Ishma's skill at maternal caretaking and her sense of collective identity are drawn more closely from her affiliation with Dr. Unthank's birthing assistant, Grandma Huff rather than Dr. Unthank. With the onset of Ishma's labor, Dr. Unthank sends for the midwife, Grandma Huffmore, because "He and Grandma Huff were old accomplices" (188). Clearly, the frequency of Grandma Huff's presence at births with Dr. Unthank attests to the value of her experience as a midwife by aligning her with a medically trained physician. Like Ishma's Granny Starkweather, Grandma Huff tends to the birthing of "ready makes" and assists Ishma's birth. When Grandma Huff falls ill, Ishma responds by taking care of Grandma Huff as well as taking care of Grandma Huff's community of working-class women whose babies rarely survived and whose reproductive bodies always fell further into invalidism or insanity.

Mountain Utopia of a Maternal Collective

Ishma's role in the community is defined by the care she brings to Grandma Huff's community of women and her community is defined by the maladies that strike the reproductive bodies Ishma tends. Dr. Unthank recognizes that Ishma's skilled nursing provides a more effective cure than the drugs or the leftist philosophy he prescribes. Dr. Unthank's observations extend beyond the realm of nursing and he refers to Ishma as "the great earth mother" (295). As the great earth mother who believes she is taking care of the needs of the women within her community, Ishma begins looking in on Annie Weaver. Grandma Huff describes Annie as having "birthed twins that died, an' got so tore up she kain't have any more" (200).

Ishma's next patient, Mame Wallace, was a woman who started working in the mills at age eleven and was in the final stages of pellagra, a niacin deficiency that leads to dementia. Mame had she spent most of life giving her children what little milk she could afford while denying

herself this life-saving nutrient. Kansie, had six children and one on due any day and her fervent hope was to have her eldest daughter, May, finish high school. Ishma works tirelessly tending her patients and maintaining “perfection” in tending to Rad and the house. Dargan describes her protagonist, “...she thrived on difficulties and wanted no rest” (204). The community of women who so desperately need Ishma’s maternal care provide the sense of personal fulfillment that Ishma so desperately desires. Maternal caretaking, for Ishma is a choice rather than an imposed burden. So, with her daughter at her side, the great earth mother tends the ever increasing rates of births, injuries, flu, deaths, and dementia caused by pellagra.

Unlike the other Gastonia authors, Dargan locates her maternal protagonist inside the homes of the millworkers, rather than in the mill. By locating Ishma outside of the textile mills, Dargan provides a greater freedom for her protagonist in establishing a sense of a communal caretaking identity. Thus, the perception of a maternal-based solidarity is built upon a sense of trust and belonging to a family group who not only shares similar goals and aspirations, but also helps to nurture the body, as well as the political spirit. Ishma’s visits among the women of Spindle Hill evolve into a covert method of union recruitment for “The National,” Dargan’s red vision of the Communist-led National Textile Workers Union. When Ishma receives a message to call upon the home of Ella Ramsey, she expects Ella’s daughter, Nancy, is ill. However, Ella Ramsey does not expect help for her daughter, she expects Ishma to be the “best recruiter in Spindle Hill” to pass unnoticed by the mill’s management and hand out union cards.

Ishma’s reticence in taking on this task of union recruiting is not predicated upon her fear of the textile mill’s management or her belief that such a position will interfere with her care of her own daughter, Vennie. Rather, Ishma believes that she is not qualified to speak for the millworkers because she has never worked in the mill. Ella argues: “You can learn might fast.

It's like I've been tellin' you, we need somebody they ain't afraid of an' will believe in" (223). Ella believes that the millworkers will trust Ishma because Ishma has established her credibility through her genuine concern for the mothers and children within her community. Convinced that she can learn quickly, the great earth mother envisions her new sense of self-identity as part of a revolutionary community. Ishma's moment of epiphany is revealed within her maternal affirmation, "Of all things, what she wanted most was to count, to be a part of something real, as everlasting, at least, as humanity" (227). For Ishma, something real is rooted within the female community of Winbury where she has shared the intimate lived experiences of other women through her maternal caretaking. Ishma knows their most desperate desires for something better for their children and for themselves. Ishma now recognizes her power to make something "count" for humanity, by affecting the social body, caring for and about the working-class women and children.

Ironically Ishma's vocational desire and maternal activism emerge with the tragic death of her daughter. Dargan foreshadows the fate of Vennie within Ishma's epiphany of self-actualization. Ishma recognizes herself as a "child" of the mountains where "The breast offered her was thin and unbounteous, but it served" (232). Dargan posits her protagonist's self-sufficiency as a product of her maternal mountains that served her own maternal development where she laments the helplessness of the people who had only their jobs inside of the mill and "Outside of that, what did they do?" Ishma identifies her maternal experience as something she learned from her own experience in the mountains and as something "real" that she could do for her community. Dargan reveals the value of maternal knowledge as communal caretaking: "Every man, at some time or other, ought to know what it was to dig a grave for a fellow-man and lay him in it. Every woman ought to know how to tenderly handle the dead, and care for a

new born child” (232). Dargan contrasts the caretaking rituals with those of modernity where such services are for hire.

The “soft purr” of an oncoming chauffer-driven automobile interrupts the maternal epiphany of Dargan’s protagonist with a symbolic crash of class and gender. Although Ishma leaps in front of the car to save her child, Vennie dies as a result of the impact. Joseph Urgo argues that Ishma’s sickly female child symbolizes the burden of childbearing and Vennie’s death is emancipatory and provides Ishma with the freedom to pursue political involvement (78). While the car accident clearly represents an emancipatory event that lifts the burden of childcare, it also leads Ishma toward yet another position of surrogate motherhood. During her own convalescence from the accident, the daughter of the limousine owner routinely seeks out visits with Ishma that will provide an urban child with stories of the rural life in the mountains. Janet Lane asserts that Ishma’s stories serve the dual purpose of oral history as well as the political education of the bourgeoisie daughter, Billie Joe, who may in the future, become an enlightened ally to the working-class cause (101). From a maternal lens, the alliance between classes is rooted in the maternal knowledge of caretaking. The identity of Dargan’s protagonist is based upon Ishma’s self-knowledge as a woman and as a mother who was nurtured at the “thin and unbounteous” breast of a maternal mountain. Ishma passes on her caretaking experience as knowledge to another generation of women through Billy Joe with the hope of maternal solidarity.

A charismatic "comrade from the North" achieves Ishma's ultimate conversion to maternal-based political activism by reaching Ishma’s core identity with the promise:

Communism is not a beast waiting in the dark to devour us and our children. It is a great mother calling us to peace and plenty We shall not cease asking and taking and fighting so long as there is one child in the world whimpering vainly for bread; one child shivering sleepless in the winter’s cold; one child lifting its eyes for true knowledge and

receiving a lie. We shall clear this jungle; we shall cleanse these shambles; and leave for our children a land of peace and fair meadows. To die in such a cause, as some of us must, is to die triumphant. (291)

The comrade from the North is preaching a maternal revelation that focuses on the children of the working-class as future revolutionaries. Amos Freer, Dargan's fictionalized Communist Leader, Fred Beal, confirms both the Party's vision of a future working-class revolution and Ishma's vision of maternal solidarity by assigning Ishma to the task of "Visiting the homes and looking 'specially after the children.'" Dargan then aligns Ishma Waycaster with a female mentor, the fictionalized version of Gastonia's strike organizer, Vera Buch Weisbord, Eva Blaine. Blaine and Ishma began training and "Within three days Ishma could have supplied any demanded report concerning the children whose welfare was involved in the strike" (311). However, Dargan thrusts her protagonist's idealism into Gastonia's fires of historical realities and as the "Committee of One Hundred" ransacks the company store, the mothers tell their children, "They'll be nothing to eat today" (316).

Hungry children inspire maternal solidarity and the maternal strikers went to jail for protesting the lack of legal intervention in the destruction of the store. Dargan assesses maternal value in the novel by reporting that it took over a hundred dollars of union's funds to release the nursing mother of a 2-month old baby. Anna Jenkins, was restored to her four children, ages 2 months to 5 years, after spending twenty-four hours in jail. While mothers sang songs of "solidarity" sick women and children were evicted from their company houses and the women protested because the law, who had the blind eye on the committee, had intervened in the evictions. Although there are no fatalities from bayonets or gunshots, the fatalities of Dargan's strike at Winbury were those who were left homeless, sick, hungry, and demented.

The harshest dose of reality that tests the modern reader is Dargan's depiction her protagonist's blatant racism near the end of the novel. Although contemporary critics debate the

reasons for Ishma's inability to cross the barrier of race and evolve as an ideal member of the Communist Party, they agree that Dargan clearly articulates the divisive racism within the South through her protagonist. Although Dargan's protagonist evolves as an individual throughout the novel, nonetheless, Ishma is clearly an uneducated rural Appalachian southern woman who responds to the realistic events within the narrative as stigmatizing to her identity as maternal body. During her confrontation with the lynch mob, one man refers to Ishma as, "A bitch runnin' round with niggers!" (378). Although Ishma anticipates the possibility of being physically brutalized by the men, she fears the social stigma more:

A flogging, though it should leave her broken for life, could be covered up by the police and condoned by the "best people." An associate of niggers! Behind their screens of respectability, social, legal, churchly, they would smile at the lashes on her flesh. She could see Virginia Grant's delicate eyebrows going up. "And we thought of her as a companion for my innocent child." (378)

Dargan explicitly asserts the reality of a police cover-up and the overt racial slurs that prevailed in the real life Gastonia. However, the height of the insults occur at the end of Ishma's reflections when she reveals her fear of a middle class woman's criticism striking at her maternal identity as a child's companion. Without any more self-reflection, Ishma courageously enacts her rescue of Butch Wells, her African American union brother. When Butch's wife, Gaffie embraces Ishma, she is repulsed, slaps Gaffie, flees from the house, and catches the first train to Asheville.

While it is difficult to speculate why Dargan's depiction of racism in the South is perpetuated through her protagonist, reading the racially charged events through a maternal lens, reveals an accurate and realistic portrayal of southern racism. Ishma's rescue crosses southern social boundaries or what Dargan refers to as "screens of respectability"(378). Moreover, Ishma's actions also crossed the boundary of southern womanhood where her position among the white community posits her as the maternal guardian of morality would also be jeopardized.

Viewing the racial prejudice within the novel through an idealized image of a maternal body, the transgressing of the boundaries of race was equally as serious in the rural South as the transgressing boundaries of sexual immorality.

In her contemporary study, Ackerman also defends Dargan's treatment of this racial incident as a reflection of the Dargan's social conditioning or as the authorial intent where Dargan portrays her character as a "*student* of the revolution with many lessons yet to learn" or as "an element of realism" (author's emphasis Ackerman xvi). Clearly, Ishma's late night transgressions will ultimately result in her being ostracized from the community that she struggles so desperately to build, so the defection of Dargan's protagonist may indeed, represent a pragmatic compromise that maintains the integrity of her southern woman, but also realistically illustrates the need for social change with regard to racism in the South.

There is little doubt that by the time Dargan wrote *Call Home the Heart*, she had gained an acute political awareness and understood that of publication in the 1930s hinged upon writing Ishma as a repentant maternal body who must be "called home" to her husband and son. Yet, contrary to contemporary criticism, Ishma Waycaster's return to the mountains also reflects a party loyalty and sense of collective responsibility. Ishma leaves the proletarian revolution in the fictionalized Gastonia in the capable hands of Amos Freer and his Northern comrades and she follows her heart as well as the command of the fictionalized version of Fred Beal who states, "You'll go where you are sent" (311). Ishma, as a maternal heroine, takes charge of the striker's children and pleads for their welfare, "There are over forty children that ought to be sent to the country somewhere—on the farms, or up in the mountains—" (313). Ishma's revolutionary red vision is a maternal vision of turning Cloudy Knob into a summer retreat, patterned after the

dream of Mr. Beasley's farm collective, where other mothers could help provide a healthier environment for their children as well as the children of other women.

Along with a romanticized ending of returning the protagonist to her husband's embrace and the newly established economic stability of the Waycaster farm, Ishma voices her maternal desire as concern for the families of her union collective:

I was thinking about a lot of little kids that I'd like to bring them up here in the summer – every summer. I'd like to give them plenty to eat and turn them loose on the mountain to get strong." . . . It will take a lot of milk and eggs. . . . If I can do that for the kids, Britt, I'd not feel as if I'd run away just to get fat and lazy and old up here. (430)

Ishma's call home to the mountains is more than a nostalgic call for a return to the past; it is a maternal activist's call to provide for the future generations. Ishma's dream of a retreat reflects Dargan's own maternal desire to provide a better life for needy children. In a letter to her friend, Isabel Barrows, Dargan wrote: "[I]f I ever have a home in which little ones can be happy I can easily fill it. The mere productive function is the least part of human motherhood, and no woman should call herself childless so long as there is one child in the world" (qtd. in Ackerman 8). Dargan's feminist message is a collective maternal message that embraces motherhood as a militant act of resistance, not a romanticized retreat to a pastoral ideal.

Dargan also returns her protagonist to Cloudy Knob with control over her reproductive destiny. Ishma Waycaster returns with knowledge that prevents her from "living like an old cow. Fodder in winder and grass in summer, and a calf every year" (393). Dargan's liberating messages attest to a woman's need for an individual fulfillment as well as vocational fulfillment outside of her reproductive capabilities. In *Call Home the Heart*, Dargan invokes the glorification of domesticity and motherhood as an emancipatory radical red vision of maternal activism and working-class solidarity to create a space for a woman's political voice.

CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION

Maternal Militancy

The stories of Gastonia as depicted by Mary Heaton Vorse, Grace Lumpkin, Myra Page, and Olive Dargan are distinctive to critical analysis and history because they reflect the participation of women as a militant collective in a seminal event in unionism. These 1930s Leftist writers propose an operative model of maternal-based solidarity where maternal nurturing and the caretaking of a woman's family provide the motivation to create and sustain a working-class struggle for economic and political reform. As Zandy insists “class knowledge comes from experience and story, history and memory and from the urgency of witnessing. Class solidarity is born from perceptions of common struggles and common enemies” (8). The strike at Loray Mill and the death of Ella May Wiggins’ sparked a wave of working-class resistance across the Southern Piedmont Region. The unquestionable reality of female experience brought by Vorse, Lumpkin, Page, and Dargan reveals the lived history of working-class women in the Depression era South, who despite their long hours working within the mill and their domestic responsibilities and childcare, still mustered both the time and the energy to resist the paternalistic system that circumscribed their personal as well as their professional lives. These authors depict class solidarity through the maternal representation of Ella May Wiggins to reflect a specific time and place when urgency not only drew female millworkers together in their common struggle for subsistence survival, but also drew progressive women together in their common struggle for social justice.

The class knowledge of Vorse, Lumpkin, Page, and Dargan originates within their own lived histories and urgency to articulate a gendered knowledge as a basis for political unity. All four authors were products of a feminist vision fostered through the political milieu of a literary

Leftist era where writing one's life was also reflecting one's politics. In the 1930s, perceptions of gender in Leftist politics closely mirrored the traditional perceptions of womanhood and followed the conventional patterns of a gendered division of labor. These female authors rely upon the cultural acceptance of sentimentalized traditions to temper their feminist politics. The maternal representations of Ella May Wiggins not only reflect a unifying identity of the collective, but they also appeal to a female readership as common experience.

Vorse, Lumpkin, Page and Dargan had established their literary reputations and were earning their living by writing for newspapers, magazines, and book sellers. Moreover, they wrote for a very specific audience, women and men who recognized social injustice and sought political solutions. Moreover, the female-authored Gastonia novels drew a large contingency of liberal females within their readership. The authors not only produced a political narrative, but they also produced what they hoped would be marketable. The authors appealed to the social consciousness of their female readership through the sentimentalized plot that was familiar to their readers. In addition to *Strike!* and other labor-related fiction, Vorse produced love stories for popular magazines that provided her with a source of quick funding. She referred to these particular stories as "lollipops," but at the core of the fictionalized sweetness is a subversive act of resistance. For example, one story reflects a protagonist who was a "tomboylike heroine whose direct approach wrests the prized male from the simpering belle (Garrison, *Mary* 31). Although Vorse's protagonist seeks a traditional union of marriage, she is not passive or submissive, but rather actively pursues her goal. In addition to entertainment, the narrative reveals the physical and emotional strength of a woman which also suggests radical possibilities of a similar rebellion to a socially-conscious reader.

Lumpkin and Page also penned stories for *Working Woman*, the Communist Party's magazine directed toward female readers and the *Masses*, but their narratives of resistance were more direct than Vorse's lollipops. Dargan had also already established her reputation as a feminist playwright and poet prior to writing *Call Home the Heart*. These four authors not only embraced their political environment, but they also challenged the patriarchal ideologies and encouraged other women to challenge their traditional roles through sentimentalized feminine narratives laced with a subversive resistance. The maternal representation of Ella May Wiggins contributes to enhancing a more feminine heroine with whom the readers could identify through the common experiences of cooking, cleaning, and childcare. At the same time, by linking common experiences, the authors also link the common enemy of gender oppression. Both the domestic angel and the maternal rebel resonated with their female readership.

Although the Gastonia authors creatively contested their culturally prescribed roles with feminist subversion, they were also setting political precedents for the Communist Party. It was not until the mid-1930s that the Communist Party even began to address the issues of gender (Weigand 20). At the time when Lumpkin, Page, and Dargan were writing their narratives of Gastonia, the Party's concepts of ethnic, race, and gender solidarity were still in their embryonic stages. Thus, the literary contributions of these authors, in many ways, illustrate their feminist attempt to shape a radical political agenda for collective activism with special attention to the common struggles of working-class females. Through their depictions of Ella May Wiggins at Gastonia, these female authors were articulating a model of collective activism that embraced gender and race as well as class.

Although Vorse resisted any affiliation with the Communist Party, her biography reveals her leftist political leanings and a history of feminist resistance and union activism that informed

her writing. Vorse's resistance to marriage and her desire for a career in writing resulted in her mother disinheriting her because her politics were in direct conflict to her mother's traditional goals for her daughter. Despite her mother's disapproval, Vorse lived the life of a labor journalist and fiction writer, as well a single mother stricken with guilt over the neglect of her children. Vorse's female-focused writing conducts a precarious negotiation between a woman's conflicting roles as mother and as writer. At the same time Vorse's narrative also suggests that the alienation between Vorse and her own mother may have contributed to her internalized guilt and fostered her desire to articulate a model of maternal-based solidarity as the desire for unity among women.

Vorse's desire for female unity can also be linked to her membership in Heterodoxy. According to Judith Schwartz, Heterodoxy was a luncheon club of "unorthodox" women, formed in Greenwich Village in 1912 during the Progressive era by a group of women who "were ardently pro-women supporters who knew the vital necessity of strong female friendships as well as the importance of sharing information with other women outside of the narrow confines of friendship circles" (2). The bi-weekly luncheons provided valuable networks for women to discuss a wide range of issues affecting their lives ranging from suffrage to child rearing. Along with attracting Vorse into their intellectual circle, the Heterodites also attracted women like, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Susan Glaspell, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Rose Pastor Stokes, Crystal Eastman, Helen Hull, Mable Dodge Luhan, as well as other unorthodox women. In her history of Heterodoxy, Schwartz contends these Village suffragists "saw feminism as the value system that would accompany the new socialist order" (35).

Much of Vorse's writing reflects many of the same concerns and political goals that were voiced through the writing of the Heterodites and other Progressive women of the early part of

the century and were, no doubt, included as topics of conversations during their luncheon meetings. By the time Vorse was writing *Strike!* women had already been granted franchise, yet Vorse was still witnessing the ways that many women were still disenfranchised. *Strike!* reflects a proto-feminism that embraces both class and gender equality and seeks solutions for social injustice. Vorse's protagonist symbolizes a shared identity and a unifying experience that represents a maternal-value system. Mamie Lewes, as a fictionalized Wiggins represents a gendered struggle for unity among women in their common struggle for their equal rights.

Lumpkin, Page, and Dargan were drawn to Communism in the 1920s when the Party first severed its ties with a moderate Socialist Party and much of the Party's early idealistic vision is reflected in their writing. In writing their lived histories of Gastonia, these authors articulated what they believed reflected the goals of the Party for resolving social injustice. The idealized vision of these writers inspired them to integrate political models of solidarity into their narratives as their proposed solutions to the social ills that plagued the country. Although the Party, in the mid-1920s, was struggling for its own direction, it began promoting ethnic solidarity as a collective strategy for accomplishing social change. By 1928, the Party was embracing a resolution known as the "Black Belt" theory that called for a multi-racial solidarity (Weigand 16). Within their narratives, Lumpkin, Page, and Dargan reconstruct their idealized collective visions with a model of maternal-based solidarity that would transcend the restrictive boundaries class, gender, and race.

Page's *Gathering Storm* aggressively assaults racism as one of the most divisive issues in the South. Page confronts racism through her graphic descriptions of a white doctor's lack of response to childbirth complications and the brutal rape and murder of a black woman. In *Gathering Storm*, Page draws a portrait of an African American woman in agonizing labor

attempting to birth a breech infant, but both mother and infant die because a white doctor would not come to the mill housing in the “Back Row” to assist in the birth. Page follows the death of the mother and infant with the brutal rape and murder of another young black woman who looks forward to leaving her job, marrying a black sharecropper, and raising babies. The young black woman is a servant in the mill owner’s home and on her way home one evening, she is raped and murdered by the mill owner’s son. While these acts of violence have been analyzed by Urgo and others as depictions of capitalist oppression against the working-class, the presence of these maternal images also implies a representation of gender oppression.

In *To Make My Bread*, Lumpkin addresses racism through her protagonist’s perceptions of her co-workers as sharing a common identity as well as a common enemy, the paternalistic mill system. Also, Lumpkin’s protagonist, Bonnie McClure, forms a relationship of mutual support with her black neighbors when Bonnie’s infant dies while she is at work in the mill. Drawn together by the death of a child, Mrs. Allen and her daughter, Savannah, come to Bonnie’s aid with emotional support and a practical solution for childcare. Lumpkin, like the other Gastonia novelists relies upon a female unity rooted in maternal caretaking to illustrate her collective politics of maternal-based solidarity as transcending race.

While Dargan never officially join the Communist Party, her claim to be “vivid red” and her revolutionary writing imply her sentiments toward radical politics and feminist solutions for social injustice. Although in *Call Home the Heart*, Dargan’s southern protagonist wrestles with her own racism, the larger focus of her narrative relies upon feminist solutions for class issues. Dargan alters the story of Ella May Wiggins as the wife who was abandoned by her husband. Instead, Dargan’s protagonist, Ishma Hensley, abandons both husband and son in the mountains to search for personal fulfillment in the mill town in the valley. Ishma is pregnant when she

leaves the mountain, but the child dies in an automobile accident and Ishma emerges as a union organizer. The tragic car accident that causes the death of her young daughter suggests another example of capitalist oppression upon female bodies. At the same time, the death of her child strategically frees Ishma from the burdens of maternal responsibility and provides her with an opportunity to become politically involved in union organization.

Along with lifting the burdens of maternity in strategic moments to permit their protagonists to pursue their political aspirations, the female Gastonia authors also focused on pregnancy as economically and physically draining and proposed a radical idea of birth control. At a time when most states were still enforcing the Comstock Law, Lumpkin, Page, and Dargan confronted the issues of birth control and abortion as methods of controlling pregnancy. Lumpkin and Page drew upon graphic images of abortion attempts to illustrate the desperation women face when “caught” with another mouth to feed. The perception of pregnancy as gender inequity that informs the writing of these authors was also part of the Communist Party’s goals during the Popular Front and the Party advocated women’s access to free birth control and abortion (Weigand 23). Within their discourse of class solidarity, the female Gastonia authors embedded their feminist philosophies.

The narratives of the female-authored Gastonia reflect the urgency of women during the Depression era who became the scapegoats for the country’s economic ills and were accused of taking jobs from able-bodied men. Their depictions of maternal privation legitimized the motives of the female mill workers at Gastonia. As long as mothers were working to guarantee the survival of their children, then their labor outside of the home was justified. Alice Kessler-Harris notes that Depression era was divisive for women because of the class emphasis on the legitimacy of women wage earners and women were urged “to have the courage to refuse work

for gain” (qtd. in Kessler-Harris 258). In order to appeal to Northern readers who were being forced out of their jobs, the narratives of Gastonia reflected the desperation of the female Southern millworkers and the need of their wages as subsistence survival. All four Gastonia authors portray male characters in their novels as either absent or ineffectual as breadwinners. This strategy highlights the legitimacy of wage work positioning the female wage earner as the sole source of family income sustaining the survival of her children.

Maternal Solidarity as a Feminist Vision

The novels of Vorse, Lumpkin, Page, and Dargan defy most attempts to locate them in a single category of proletarian literature. In locating the Gastonia novels within the 1930s era of social protest, Barbara Foley defines various other components of proletarian literature, such as the social novel, fictional autobiography, collective novel, and bildungsroman. This dissertation study focuses upon these works as social novels where the authors’ underlying motives are to move their readers toward a revolutionary sympathy through their identification with maternal representations. Maternal representations suggest unifying experiences between the protagonist, reader, and author that transcend the boundaries of class and embrace multiple identities. Rabinowitz contends that the focus of female revolutionary writers within the political milieu of the 1930s was that of depicting class relations. The “inscriptions of female desire” as Rabinowitz explains, “create a possibility for theorizing the multiplicity of differences—racial, class, gender, ethnic, sexual—in a more complex way that simply repeating a litany of Otherness”(181). By foregrounding maternal identity as class solidarity, Vorse, Lumpkin, Page, and Dargan posit a relational model that is born of common struggle with a common enemy. At a time when most proletarian fiction depicted women as the victims of capitalist exploitation, the authors of a female-authored Gastonia portrays an alternate image that emphasizes the power of collective resistance where the disparity in class relations is the common enemy. Foregrounding class as

inclusive as well as collective diffuses the politics of difference by emphasizing common experiences. Collective resistance, in these Gastonia narratives, is depicted as maternal experience and the desire to provide the most basic of human needs for all children.

The strike at Gastonia was over eighty years ago and until the past couple of years, it has remained the subject of few short articles in journals and a line or two or perhaps, a chapter in book that examines the narratives of the working class. More scholars are discovering the possibility for theorizing the Gastonia novels as multiple representations of cultural and political identity. The 2004 dissertation studies of Janet E. Lane and Wes Mantooth and have been released as books in the summer of 2006 by Routledge. Lane's study examines the Gastonia novels as pseudo-documentaries that reveal a politically-informed "language of conflict and aggression" that was ultimately responsible for the silencing of the Gastonia novelists as female writers (518). Mantooth examines how the ballads and the folk culture of North Carolina are integrated into the politics of the Gastonia narratives. Mantooth defines his study as an examination of the Gastonia novels as "Marxist-informed narratives that reveal the each author's stance towards the dialectic relationship of culture, ideology, and action" (926). These studies, along with other unheralded dissertation studies, confirm that the narratives of the strike Gastonia are commanding a closer examination by scholars of their literary merits.

This study of the politics of Depression era maternal activism in the feminine portrayals of Gastonia also contributes to a neglected area of proletarian fiction by asserting that the representation of the reproductive body in the female-authored novels of Gastonia represents a collective maternal identity that inspires solidarity and union activism. Opportunities for rethinking representation of class in the Gastonia novels include a study of Sherwood Anderson's *Beyond Desire* and William F. Rollins' *The Shadow Before*. Rollins' Gastonia novel

has been recently reissued in 2005 inviting the application of new theoretical perspectives. A theoretical pairing of these two male authors may offer some insight into their sexualized depictions of female millworkers at Gastonia.

Mary Heaton Vorse's affiliation with Heterodoxy in Greenwich Village in the early 1900s also suggests other areas of inquiry into the women's narratives that spanned from the Progressive era into World War II. The majority of the Heterodites appear to be prolific writers and Schwartz suggests feminist inquiry on the long-neglected works of the Heterodites, as well as other neglected "foresisters" (116). Schwartz provides an extensive bibliography of books and articles published by Heterodoxy Members.

Working-class studies offers the most salient field of inquiry to expand the study of class identity and its representations in literature. As the Gastonia novels reveal, the category of class creates a unifying element that can be used to bridge the differences other marginalized groups. The novels of Gastonia are only a small representation of the literary antecedents of female working class narrative. In her definition of working class narrative, Zandy "claims that working-class literature comes from material existence rather than canonized literature" (11). Whether the female narratives are reflected through historical events like the strike at Gastonia or the fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company, material existence is at the core of the event and capitalist oppression is at its foundation. Working-class literature reflects both a struggle and a culture that historically resonates through decades of fiction that extend from seminal events in union organizing into the working-class experiences of the present.

This inquiry has sought to illuminate the novels of Vorse, Lumpkin, Page, and Dargan as a feminist body of working-class fiction that draws a portrait of a Depression era southern millworker whose murder was an act of class hatred. The real Ella May Wiggins is more than a

maternal martyr who died for the union cause; she represents the lived history of the female millworkers at the Loray Mill. Through her death, she brought a deeper meaning to the strike in Gastonia that inspired a maternal-based solidarity. In their narratives, Vorse, Lumpkin, Page, and Dargan revive the memory of Wiggins and send a prophetic and pertinent message to their readers through their fictional portrayal of a revolutionary reproductive body who posits maternal activism as a collective solution for the social injustice that can change the world for the future of all children.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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