

ABSTRACT

LEE, ELISABETH GRACE. *Pilgrims' Progress: Southern Social Activists' Journey from Christianity to Communism during the 1920s and 1930s.* (Under the direction of Dr. David A. Zonderman.)

The present work approaches the history of the Popular Front from a biographical and micro-historical perspective by closely examining the lives of three elite, white southern women who became social activists and writers in the 1920s. Katharine Du Pre Lumpkin, Myra Page, and Lumpkin's older sister, Grace Lumpkin, all worked within the southern Social Gospel movement in their youth. Each woman also remarkably transformed her life and faith in search of social justice, not hesitating to embrace radical ideologies in search of her goal. This thesis locates the source of their activism in the religious belief-systems of the South, finding that the lessons they took from Christianity informed their contributions to the southern Popular Front. On the path from Christianity to Communism, Page and the Lumpkin sisters left behind a rich trove of primary source material for scholars to explore. Their writing offers valuable insight into the means by which educated southern white women constructed a critique of southern attitudes toward race, class and gender in the Jim Crow South. Examining their personal transformations during this moment of radical possibility offers a fresh perspective on the experience of southern women activists in the early twentieth century.

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Pilgrims' Progress: Southern Social Activists' Journey from Christianity to Communism
during the 1920s and 1930s

by
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DEDICATION

For Lawrence,

whose love, support, and folding of endless loads of laundry

made this endeavor possible;

and for Mor Mor,

who entertained kids for countless hours while I wrote.

BIOGRAPHY

Elisabeth Grace Lee is completing her final year in the graduate program at North Carolina State University. Her research interest is in twentieth century American History, particularly in the religious beliefs and ideological assumptions of southern Popular Front activists. Ms. Lee received her Bachelor's degree from the Cornell University School of Industrial and Labor Relations where she concentrated in Labor & Employment Law. She lives in Raleigh, North Carolina, with her husband and two children and can be reached at eglee3@ncsu.edu.

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INTRODUCTION

It is our inward journey that leads us through time—forward or back, seldom in a straight line, most often spiraling.... As we discover, we remember; remembering, we discover; and most intensely do we experience this when our separate journeys converge.

—Eudora Welty, *One Writer's Beginnings* (1984)

Many Christians who witnessed the South's rapid industrialization after World War I found the gospel message too personal to translate into social action. Some activists managed to surmount that obstacle with the help of the southern Social Gospel movement, which encouraged adherents to practice the Christian faith not just as a call to personal conversion, but also as a commitment to social reform. The American Social Gospel movement of the early twentieth century applied Christian ethics to social problems such as economic inequality, racial tensions, and child labor. Social Gospellers found theological support for their efforts in the Lord's Prayer, particularly in Christ's request that his Father's "will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Working within the Social Gospel movement, yet not fully part of it, a handful of elite, white southern women practiced a form of Christian social activism that ultimately drew them into the radical milieu of the Popular Front. Katharine Du Pre Lumpkin and Myra Page, noted sociologists and writers, along with Katharine Lumpkin's older sister, proletarian writer, Grace Lumpkin, each worked within the Social Gospel movement in their youth. Their work for the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) emboldened them to press for change in the region, but the limitations they experienced within that organization

finally encouraged each of them to explore more radical alternatives. On her path from Christianity to Communism, each woman in this study contributed to the literature of the Popular Front. Katharine Lumpkin's semi-autobiographical sociological study, *The Making of a Southerner*, suggested reasons for southern distinctiveness, while Page and Grace Lumpkin's fiction captured the travails of southern industry and pronounced judgment upon it. Their writing offered such a valuable and critical regional perspective to the Popular Front that, together with other southern writers of the period, they effectively defined a "Southern Front."¹

The women of the Southern Front lived in exciting times and they knew it. The Popular Front represented the most unified response to fascism Americans had ever seen. Reaching its zenith between the years 1935 and 1939, the social and artistic movement resulted in unprecedented levels of political collaboration between the Communist Party of America (CPUSA), labor unions, and other leftist groups. The movement remains etched in

¹ Matthew 6:10, New Revised Standard Version Bible, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000); Alex Lichtenstein coined the phrase "Southern Front" in "The Cold War and the 'Negro Question,'" but Jacquelyn Dowd Hall popularized the term in "Women Writers, the 'Southern Front,' and the Dialectical Imagination." Other authors, such as Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore in *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950*, have preferred the term "southern Popular Front" but, for the purposes of this study, I will use Hall's expression, since she convincingly argues that the Southern Front substantially differed from the radical way in which art and politics coalesced in the North during the Great Depression. Though Hall believes the Southern Front "dovetailed" with the Popular Front, she also theorizes that its art forms uniquely represent the region by illustrating "the experiences of an 'other,' invisible America" where reformers insistently called for "an end to lynching, and the re-enfranchisement of blacks and poor whites" as essential to a democratic South; Alex Lichtenstein, "The Cold War and the 'Negro Question,'" *Radical History Review*, 72 (Fall 1998), 186; Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "Women Writers, the 'Southern Front,' and the Dialectical Imagination," *The Journal of Southern History* 69 No. 1 (February 2003): 7; Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008), 4.

American memory as a time of social and political ferment in which citizens from all walks of life actively contemplated the radical reordering of American society. Congruent with this attempt at political transformation was a cultural renewal that elevated industrial work to a new status as a focal point for art and literature.²

The personal conversion narratives explored in this thesis catalog three southern women's progressions from Christianity to Communism during the Southern Front. Their stories take place against the backdrop of a South beginning to experience this cultural moment, but still fighting against progressive impulses. Page and the Lumpkin sisters were members of a "new middle class" that viewed industrial problems as intimately bound up with race; and saw strictly assigned gender roles as an unnecessary complication of women's efforts to confront problems of race and class. By studying three women who tried to effect social change, and by paying attention to oft-ignored aspects of their lives, such as their coming of age within the Jim Crow South and their Christian social reform experience, I illuminate a religious aspect of the Southern Front that is little seen when viewed with a broader lens.³

To that end, this thesis will take a biographical and micro-historical approach to considering the issues of race, class and gender in the Southern Front. Historians viewing the period through the wider lens of region, for example, have spoken of Myra Page and Grace

² Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004), 24, 83; Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth-Century* (New York: Verso, 1996), xvii-xviii; Gilmore, *Defying Dixie*, 211.

³ Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search For Order: 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 111-13.

Lumpkin only briefly, and almost exclusively in terms of their proletarian writing. From this perspective they play only minor roles within the Southern Front. Proper examination of the details of these personal transformations can lend insight into a little understood aspect of the Southern Front: the relationship between Christian social activism and Communism.⁴

Though their desire for social change initially found expression within the moderate Social Gospel movement, each woman in this study ultimately charted a more radical course. Each eventually broke with the southern Social Gospel movement over its insistence upon racial segregation and moral uplift programs. I argue that the women in this study can be situated more properly within a group of Christians whose individual interpretations of scripture both contributed to personal radicalism *and* helped to sustain the Southern Front in the face of opposition from mainstream Christianity. For this reason, I refer to them as “Christianas,” a name symbolic of their progression from one type of social understanding to another. John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* was a favorite book of Katharine Lumpkin’s and provides an important cultural reference point to describe the journey of middle class women in the Southern Front. In short, Christian’s progress “From This World to That Which Is to Come” can be seen as a metaphor for the ways in which women of the Southern Front did not become radicalized *in spite* of their Christianity, but rather *because* of it.⁵

⁴ Rebecca Scott and Jean M. Hebrard, *Freedom Papers: An Atlantic Odyssey in the Age of Emancipation* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2012), 5; Gilmore, *Defying Dixie*, 91.

⁵ The full title of Bunyan’s book is “The Pilgrim’s Progress From This World to That Which Is to Come: Delivered under the Similitude of a Dream Wherein in Discovered, The Manner of His Setting Out, His Dangerous Journey; and Safe Arrival at the Desired Country.” It was originally published in London, in 1678, but remained popular reading for southern Christian

This study will draw together two strains of discourse about the Southern Front that have previously been kept separate. Consequently, it will explore the movement from both a religious, and gendered, perspective. Historians have previously written about Myra Page and the Lumpkin sisters from either a literary perspective, or one that emphasizes their Communist Party involvement, while neglecting their formative experiences. Examining their early lives has convinced me of the value of combining these interpretations, which I find extraordinarily useful, with more recent historical interpretations of the Southern Front that highlight the role of the Christian religion as a motivator for social activism. Combining these two separate strains of research means that the present work will not fit neatly inside any historiographical niche, so I have chosen to emphasize those works that deal specifically with the women who are the focus of my research.⁶

Historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall's work provides the quintessential example of this type of scholarship. In her 1979 *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign Against Lynching*, Hall presents one of the earliest explorations of

families well into the twentieth century; John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress from this World to that Which is to Come* (1678; reprint, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2009).

⁶ For early examples of the new social history that incorporate religion and labor history, see E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, (New York: Random House, 1963); and Herbert G. Gutman, "Protestantism and the American Labor Movement: The Christian Spirit in the Guilded Age," in *Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), 88; More recent examples include: Mark Fannin, *Labor's Promised Land: Radical Visions of Gender, Race and Religion in the South*, (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2003), 288, 299; Paul Harvey, *Freedom's Coming: Religious Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War through the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 4; Jarod Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion: Labor and Religion in the New Cotton South*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 4-5, 6, 53; and Erik S. Gellman and Jarod Roll, *The Gospel of the Working Class: Labor's Southern Prophets in New Deal America*, (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 2011), 1-3.

radical feminist social reform efforts. Though working in a slightly earlier period of southern history, Hall's study is thematically similar to my own. Her exploration of the life of Texan suffragist and anti-lynching activist, Jesse Daniel Ames, enhances our understanding of southern women's social activism as it explores the links between race and gender in the Jim Crow South. While Hall focuses on the activities of white women like Ames, she also includes a thoughtful analysis of the many ways in which white women's reform activities could not have achieved success without the parallel efforts of African American women reformers. Moreover, Hall's analysis of lynching as a method of social control that wielded white womanhood as a weapon against black manhood, dominating them both in the process, connects southern women's campaign for greater autonomy to the campaign against racial violence in the South.⁷

Though Hall plans to make the Lumpkin sisters subjects of a forthcoming book, two published articles that reveal her thinking about Katharine and Grace Lumpkin hold particular relevance for this study. The first, "'You Must Remember This:': Autobiography as Social Critique," explores the agency of memory in Katharine Lumpkin's *The Making of a Southerner*, a work that Hall perceptively labels "autobiography as social critique." In the article, Hall posits how Lumpkin's part-autobiographical, part-sociological study of southern history functions as a *lieux de mémoire* that recovers an alternative narrative often forgotten in the 1940s' celebration of Lost Cause values. Hall finds that Lumpkin

takes pains to stress, not her uniqueness or the success of her flight [from the South], but her commonality with her readers. She is both an outsider and

⁷ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign Against Lynching* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979).

everywoman. Like us, she is steeped in memory, yet capable of freedom. Speaking in the first person, she seeks, not just to critique the past, but to perform her own movement from past to present. Her writing embodies a promise: Change can occur—has already occurred—from within.

Though Hall does not deeply explore Grace Lumpkin's fictional writing in this article, she does submit that her fictional work, as well as Katharine Lumpkin's semi-autobiographical writing, constitutes an important "rewriting of southern history." During the Southern Front, Hall argues, such southern white women as the Lumpkin sisters "stood at the center of th[e] battle for public memory."⁸

Four years later, Hall took up her pen more specifically in support of Grace Lumpkin's work. In "Women Writers, the 'Southern Front,' and the Dialectical Imagination," she uses Grace Lumpkin's personal history of "border crossings," from Social Gospeler, to Communist, to arch-segregationist, to illustrate a larger point about the radical nature of the southern Popular Front in the 1930s. Hall asserts not only "the centrality of the South," but also of women writers to the Popular Front. She wants to "expand our understanding of the intellectual field of which the Southern Renaissance was a part, a field that included a larger regionalist impulse as well as the New Negro or Harlem Renaissance and the radical literary movement on whose wings Lumpkin briefly soared." For Hall, Grace Lumpkin "haunts the margins of southern history," yet also "points to a still emerging critical project: a feminist reimagining of the South through the 'rich and underread literature' produced by black and white southern women between the two world wars." My approach

⁸ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "'You Must Remember This:': Autobiography as Social Critique," *The Journal of American History* 85 No. 2 (September 1998): 442, 449, 453-55; Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 8-9.

mirrors Hall's in many respects, yet it is also my contention that Grace Lumpkin's Christian beliefs influenced her radical writings and can help us to re-interpret the Southern Front through a lens of feminist activism.⁹

Scholarly material on Myra Page is nearly as scarce as that on the Lumpkin sisters. In the 1980s a resurgence of interest in women's literature brought Page to the attention of a student of Jacquelyn Dowd Hall's, Christina Looper Baker. Baker wrote her doctoral thesis on Page, later published as *In a Generous Spirit: A First-Person Biography of Myra Page*. Baker supplements several oral history accounts taken by herself, and by researchers at the Southern Oral History Program, with Page's published and unpublished writings. The resulting work uses Page's words to merge her various "voices" over a sixty-five year period into a "single autobiographical voice." This "first person biography" about Myra Page is reminiscent of Maurice Isserman's work on Dorothy Healey, *American Red: A Life in the American Communist Party*. As a collaboration between Page and Baker, it combines elements of autobiography, oral history, biography, and documentary collection.

In a Generous Spirit is much more than a literary biography. Since the 1970s historians of southern women, in particular have documented and contextualized many of the movements, events, organizations, institutions and social transformations in which Myra Page played a part. Many historians have long wrestled with questions about the impulse for reform among progressive women, about motivations that spurred activism, and about the effects of religion and education on young women. Further, responses to barriers of race and class have tantalized scholars of women even more than they have perplexed more traditional historians. Page's life illustrates these issues by articulating the tension between culture and human agency and by

⁹ Hall, "Women Writers," 6-7, 9.

demonstrating the multiple ways in which a woman can respond to the world in which she is born.¹⁰

One other study on Myra Page has helped provide perspective for my research. In “Myra Page: Daughter of the South, Worker for Change,” Mary Frederickson, another student of Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, wrote an article resulting from her own interview with Myra Page. The article portrays Page as a life-long social activist whose “dual objectives have been to relate social conditions on a human scale and to place personal struggle within a framework of broader issues.” Frederickson attributes much of Page’s activism to early experiences with race and gender in Virginia, arguing that Page’s response to visible racial inequality was “a great unnamed misery...which awoke in [her] a vast incoherent questioning and hate” for white supremacy. Frederickson also sees the gendered dimension of Page’s early life as important. “Page saw her mother and three aunts as leading limited lives marked by ignored talents and suppressed sadness. She felt that she ‘couldn't follow the path that any one of them was following.’ For [Page], ‘the woman question,’ without being very concrete, developed very early.” Frederickson sees Myra Page as a visionary who lived to see her dreams for race and gender equality realized by the civil rights and women’s rights movements.¹¹

Finally, in 2008, Glenda Gilmore published what is arguably the definitive study of Southern Front social activists. In *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-*

¹⁰ Christina Looper Baker, *In a Generous Spirit: A First-Person Biography of Myra Page* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), xxi; Mary Frederickson, Afterword to *In a Generous Spirit*, 212; Dorothy Healey and Maurice Isserman, *American Red: A Life in the American Communist Party* (1990 Reprint; New York: Illini Books, 1993), 9.

¹¹ Mary Frederickson, “Myra Page: Daughter of the South, Worker for Change,” *Southern Changes* 5 No. 1 (1983): 10-15.

1950, Gilmore emphasizes the early roots of a long civil rights movement, stressing a forgotten relationship between black civil rights and a Southern “arm” of the Popular Front that included many Communists. Gilmore’s analysis favors a race-based approach to viewing a story that other historians have framed in terms of “unions versus capital, mill hands versus preachers, and patriotic insiders versus subversive outsiders.” Though exceptionally incisive, Gilmore’s study also displays the ever-present tendency of social historians to sever radical activists from their Christian roots. Her discussion of Pauli Murray, who became an Episcopalian minister after ending her involvement with the Communists, deemphasizes the tradition of Christian social activism from which many emerged and to which some, including Murray, returned.¹²

Historians working in this period who are willing to emphasize spirituality are more likely to be studying “early civil rights,” than Southern Front activism. During the civil rights movement, the degree to which many African Americans articulated citizenship claims using the language of Christianity impressed many scholars as an effective means of expressing dignity. It allowed them to argue for rights in a way that oppressors who claimed Christianity as a guiding philosophy could not legitimately ignore. I argue that the women in this study belong in the group of Southern Front activists whose actions can be more clearly understood

¹² Gilmore, *Defying Dixie*, 69; Pauli Murray’s interview in the Southern Oral History Program Collection reveals a wealth of information about Murray’s life as an Episcopalian minister. Though Gilmore references the interview in her book, she neglects to mention this aspect of Murray’s life in her analysis; Genna Rae McNeil interview with Pauli Murray, Feb. 13, 1976, Southern Oral History Program Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

through an analysis of their religious belief, and how that belief informed their work within the Southern Front.

This review of the relevant literature affirms that very few historians have properly examined the role of individual Christian religious belief for clues to the success, albeit short-lived, of the Southern Front. My intervention is simple: I want to unite the study of southern secular radicalism with the study of radical Christianity. This thesis will make a case for the exploration of individual religious belief in the Southern Front's social and labor activism. I believe this type of analysis is warranted because, despite the southern Social Gospel movement's impotence in the face of segregation and gendered disparities, evangelical Christians in significant numbers did independently support the Southern Front, effectively uniting radical activists of the 1920s and 1930s in opposition to racism and unfair working conditions. That many of these reformers eventually chose to operate under more secular banners does not diminish the importance of their religious belief. Rather, I believe that proper examination of the women of the Southern Front who chose *both* the Social Gospel *and* more radical secular ideologies at different points in their lives, can uncover previously overlooked commonalities between Christianity and Communism and highlight the ways in which radical Christianity drew unlikely activists into the Southern Front.¹³

A few of these unlikely activists will be treated in depth in this study, along with analysis of three factors that influenced their profound personal transformations: early

¹³ Gellman and Jarod Roll, *The Gospel of the Working Class*, 3; Fones-Wolf, Elizabeth, and Fones-Wolf, Ken. "Sanctifying the Southern Organizing Campaign: Protestant Activities in the CIO's Operation Dixie." *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 6 (2009): 58-59.

educational experiences, work in the southern Social Gospel movement, and their own writing. Chapter one defines the radical nature of the Christianas' early Christianity and explains its influence on their personal journey. I call it an "Awakening" because each woman noticed glaring contradictions between Christian teachings and the way southern adults treated blacks and poor whites. This conflict between the message taught and the meaning received prompted the Christianas to evaluate scripture for themselves. This process helped them carve out individualized interpretations of the gospel message they then reconciled to what they knew about southern poverty, race and gender. The chapter also considers restrictions placed on southern women by their families in a way that highlights three women's motivation to do something about racial and class inequality.

Chapter two, "Conversion," expands the focus from familial restrictions to consider the broader subject of limitations experienced by women in southern society. Through a discussion of Katharine Lumpkin's and Myra Page's experience in their Social Gospel activism, this section will interrogate the racial critique that the Christianas had begun to level against the Southern Front, and particularly the YWCA. Chapter three, "Revelation," evaluates Grace Lumpkin's contribution to the Southern Front through her writing. The chapter deconstructs the gendered critique Lumpkin and the other Christianas leveled against southern society by examining the difficulties that women faced within groups ostensibly committed to social change.

When I began this project I wanted to examine the intersection between Christianity and Communism in the South to better understand what impelled some people to switch from one dogmatic ideology to another, seemingly anathema to the first. Rather than the distinct

break I anticipated, I discovered something more nearly resembling a progression. Beginning with the constraints of a Christianity influenced by Lost Cause ideology that emphasized middle class duty to the poor, social and labor control, and racism, these women reformers progressed to a Social Gospel form of Christianity that supported the radical agenda of the Southern Front. Though I acknowledge the countless ways in which Christianity has been used to support the status quo in the South, I also want to complicate simplistic characterizations of Southern religion and show how religious belief could also act as a form of social protest and method of empowerment for Southern workers and activists. My analysis will show that this type of Christianity was not simply the inverse of Communism. Instead, each woman in this study utilized both systems of belief in similar ways, but at different times, to combat personal and social dilemmas.

This study aligns with Jacquelyn Dowd Hall's call for historians to "work nimbly at the borders—between genres and disciplines...in order to expand and enrich the dialogue in which we are engaged." By illustrating the ways in which Christian belief both contributed to radicalism and sustained the southern Popular Front—even in the face of opposition from mainstream Christianity—this thesis crosses borders between social and religious history, and highlights southern women's contributions to the Southern Front in a new way, enhancing our understanding of an, as yet, dimly lit aspect of southern history.¹⁴

¹⁴ Hall, "Women Writers," 38.

CHAPTER I: AWAKENING

Enroute to the floor of the ocean [a diver] moves to a depth of water that cannot be penetrated by light above the surface. It is dark, foreboding and eerie. The diver's immediate reaction is apt to be one of fear and sometimes a spasm of panic that soon passes. As he drops deeper and deeper into the abyss, slowly his eyes begin to pick up the luminous quality of the darkness; what was fear is relaxed as he moves into the lower region with confidence and peculiar vision.

-Howard Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness*¹⁵

The women in this chapter, Katharine du Pre Lumpkin and Myra Page, experienced several early, and deeply personal, instances of gender, social, and racial discrimination while coming of age in the Jim Crow South. Such events awakened them to incongruities between Lost Cause interpretations of social reality and southern Christian social teaching. The Lost Cause embodied a widely shared feeling, in the generations after the Civil War, that the Confederate cause had been heroic, despite southern defeat. To justify this paradigm, southern elites recast the war's narrative as one of northern aggression, rather than southern defense of slavery. This mentality produced among elite southern whites a form of paternalism that took for granted the lower estate of poor whites and blacks while emphasizing all the while a Christian benevolence toward them. Yet, rather than accept working class poverty and Jim Crow racism at face value, as did so many of their family and peers, Lumpkin and Page confronted their fears and harnessed them to effect change. The

¹⁵ Howard Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), vii-viii.

means by which they accomplished change within the Southern Front stemmed as much from early Christian influences as from their response to the inconsistencies they witnessed.¹⁶

Katharine Du Pre Lumpkin

Katharine Du Pre Lumpkin engaged with the Southern Front on many levels. As a social reformer, sociologist, and educator, throughout her career Lumpkin drew attention to, and suggested solutions for, social injustice wherever she found it. She remains best known for her writing, particularly her semi-autobiographical *The Making of a Southerner*. Equal parts sociological study and bildungsroman, the book exposes the contradictions of southern society during the nadir of race relations from the perspective of a child who came of age within it. Quibbling a bit with Lumpkin's title, the *Journal of Negro History* quipped that the book could more accurately be described as a "the making of most Americans," yet admitted that Lumpkin's assessment of white southern culture "soars serenely above a heritage and tradition of which she was a helpless victim to heights of liberalism unsurpassed by any southern writer that has yet appeared." How did Lumpkin arrive at this deep level of understanding from within an upper-middle class Southern heritage? Later chapters will place Lumpkin's activism within the framework of the Southern Front, but this section will uncover her awakening to the need for social change, locating its origins in her observations

¹⁶ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "Women Writers, the Southern Front, and the Dialectical Imagination, *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 69, No. 1 (Feb., 2003), 12.

of certain contradictions between the teachings of Christianity and the tenets of the Lost Cause.¹⁷

Awakening to Paternalism and Race: The Lost Cause

Born in 1897 in Macon, Georgia, Katharine Lumpkin descended from a long line of cotton growers. The Lumpkins presided over an operation, small by Georgia standards, yet grand enough that the main house had hallways “wide enough to drive a four-horse team through.” The neighboring county of Lumpkin, a Populist stronghold in 1892, was named after the family. In this rarefied atmosphere, Lumpkin’s ancestors immersed themselves in what she would later describe as the “traditional values of the plantation South.” Lumpkin remembered her forebears as men who were “solid” and “ambitious,” yet “conscious of responsibilities of rulership.” She thought “the better of them” were “pious and God-fearing,” exhibiting “an acutely developed sense of duty.”¹⁸

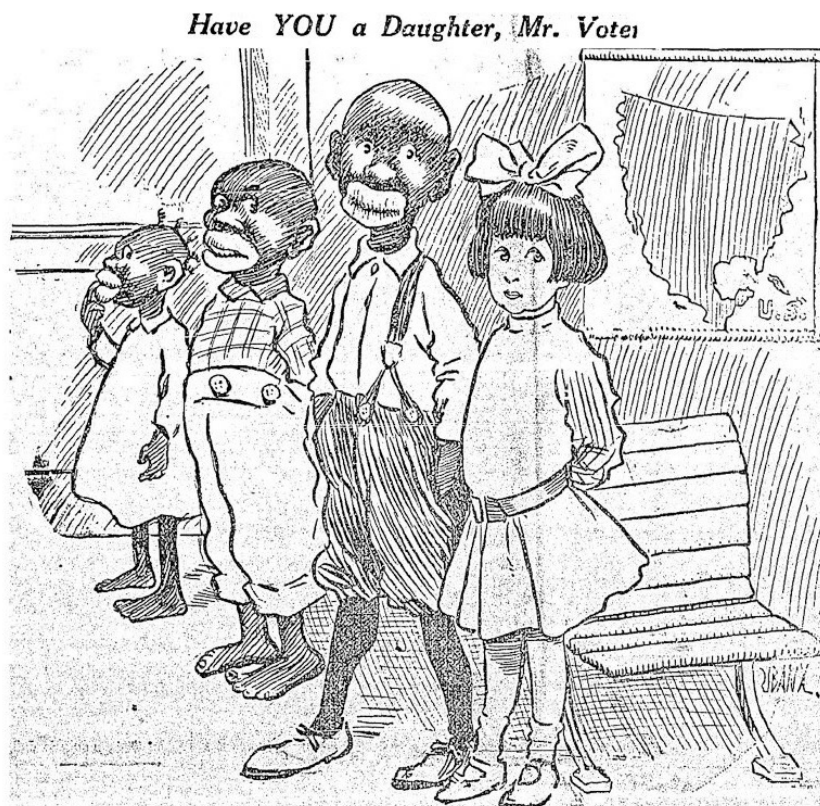
When it came to their children’s education, however, southern patriarchs often filtered religious lessons through the prism of other values. In many southern households, the Lost Cause became “a sort of religious creed in which young southern children received as

¹⁷ Review of *The Making of a Southerner*, *Journal of Negro History* N.v., n.n. (1946): 240-43, Grace Lumpkin Papers, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina (hereafter cited as Grace Lumpkin Papers); Leon F. Litwack, “Jim Crow Blues,” *OAH Magazine of History* 18 No. 2 (2004): 7.

¹⁸ Katharine Du Pre Lumpkin, interview by Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, August 4, 1974, *Southern Oral History Program Digital Archive #4007*: G-0034; Katharine Du Pre Lumpkin; *The Making of a Southerner*, (1946; reprint, Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1974), 6, 8, 11-12, 33-34, 177; Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 268.

systematic instruction and indoctrination as those emphasized in teaching prayers.” Lumpkin’s father repeatedly boasted that, while “his wife taught the children prayers, *he* taught them to revere the Lost Cause.” William Lumpkin also taught his children to venerate Civil War veterans, proudly referring to the failed Confederate experiment in a way that linked Lost Cause values to racial superiority. As a very small child, Lumpkin remembered learning that racism was “part and parcel of our upbringing. It was implicit.”¹⁹

The following political cartoon, which appeared in an Oklahoma City newspaper in Katharine Lumpkin’s tenth year, illustrates the racial attitudes that turn-of-the-century white southern parents frequently passed to their children.



¹⁹ Lumpkin, *Making*, 130; Review of *The Making of a Southerner*, *Journal of Negro History* N.v., n.n. (1946): 240-43, Grace Lumpkin papers.

Figure 1. “Have YOU a Daughter, Mr. Voter?” in Ray E. Stafford, “Gives Justice to Both the Races: Negro Must Be Made to Know His Place—Should Have Equal Privileges But Entirely Separate,” *The Daily Oklahoman*, September 13, 1907.

As a product of segregated public schooling, Lumpkin never stood in line with a stair-step of ape-like children as imagined by this *Oklahoman* sketch-artist. Yet the fear that she, and other white children, would be flooded out of their right to public schooling by a wave of prolific blacks suffused the environment in which Lumpkin came of age. In reality, blacks paid more taxes *and* received less education benefit than whites. Still, words and phrases like “impudence,” “good darkey,” and “keep them in their place,” circulated around young Lumpkin until she found herself “deeply imbued with the whole pattern of racial attitudes that were common in [the] environment.” As Lumpkin’s contemporary would later observe, “The bitter and inescapable fact is that our children in the United States, white and colored, are developing distorted, twisted personalities within the crippling frame of this race segregation which our fears and frustrations impose upon them.” The Lumpkin family, however, did not view all racist attitudes as entirely compatible with Christianity. In its decision to treat well-mannered blacks with kind paternalism, the Lumpkin family epitomized “the Janus-faced South,” in which fear of racial integration alternately produced paternalistic kindness toward blacks who behaved well by white standards, and violent repression toward those who failed to “know their place.”²⁰

²⁰ Ray E. Stafford, “Gives Justice to Both the Races: Negro Must Be Made to Know His Place—Should Have Equal Privileges But Entirely Separate,” *The Daily Oklahoman*, September 13, 1907; Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, 420; Lumpkin, *Making*, 130, 239; Lillian Smith, “There is No Negro Problem,” *The New York Age*, December 16, 1944; Lumpkin, “Interview;” Lee Cheney Jessup, “What Makes a Southerner?” *The Nashville Banner*, February 2, 1947.

By the turn of the century, however, the Lumpkin family had fallen upon hard times. The loss of the family plantation took its toll on Lumpkin's father. After leaving Georgia, the family lived for about a year on the outskirts of a small town near Columbia, South Carolina. It was here that William Lumpkin provided his daughter, Katharine, with an experience she would later refer to as "my ... awakening to a consciousness of race."²¹

The incident occurred during breakfast preparation one morning, when Lumpkin heard "sounds to make my heart pound and my hair prickle at the roots. Calls and screams were interspersed with blow upon blow." Lumpkin quickly realized the recipient of this punishment was not one of her siblings, as "when we children were punished, it might be corporal, but it was an occasion of some dignity for all parties concerned." Peeking through the kitchen window, Lumpkin witnessed a scene that shocked and terrified her. Her father, usually a paragon of gentlemanly Southern virtue, was savagely beating their cook with a stick. Lumpkin saw the tiny woman's face "distorted with fear and agony," and her father's visage, equally contorted with "stern rage." Though the woman repeatedly called out for help she expected none from the family; her attacker, as she knew, had the final say in their home. Instead, the cook appealed to a higher power, calling repeatedly for the sheriff, who lived a few doors down, to save her. The attempt proved futile, however. No one rescued her and no investigation ensued. That no one responded to the cook's calls, from within the family, or without, demonstrates the *total institution* of Jim Crow segregation. White patriarchs had

²¹ Lumpkin, *Making*, 179.

power, not only over their own families, but also over any black people who chanced to fall within their domain.²²

In later years, Lumpkin speculated about what could have prompted such a violent reaction in her normally staid father. By the early 1900s it was no longer customary for whites to flog their help, but the Lumpkin family managed to rationalize this incident away as “it had once been right not so many years before.” After all, “few Negro sins were more reprehensible in our Southern eyes than ‘impudence.’” As a child, Lumpkin could scarcely identify the uncomfortable emotions that witnessing the beating aroused in her. “If I had merely heard it as a story as one did hear of similar acts toward Negroes in my childhood,” she thought it would not have bothered her as much. Instead, “it disturbed me because I saw it.” “Thereafter, I was fully aware of myself as a white, and of Negroes as Negroes. Thenceforth, I began to be self-conscious about the many signs and symbols of my race position that had been battering against my consciousness since virtual infancy.”²³

Awakening to Class Difference: The Sand Hills

After leaving Columbia, the Lumpkins settled on a 200-acre farm on the outskirts of the most desolate of the South Carolina Sand Hills. Lumpkin referred to this period in her family’s life as a “sojourn.” Like Old Testament Israelites, she imagined her elite family as summarily ejected from the Promised Land of Georgia plantation life to wander in exile

²² Lumpkin, *Making*, 130-32.

²³ *Ibid.*, 132-33.

through the Carolina wilderness. Though small by plantation standards, the Lumpkin place in South Carolina was “the ‘big farm’ of the countryside.” In this remote region, Lumpkin and her brother found few playmates of their social station. In order to find companions, Lumpkin’s parents allowed “accustomed social distinctions...to melt away.” Lumpkin remembered that her mother, Annette Lumpkin, had “accepted as inevitable that so long as we lived our life here it must be among the people as we found them.” Yet, though they lived among the poor in the countryside, the Lumpkins still thought of themselves as “people of family.” Lumpkin remembered that, upon their arrival in the Sand Hills, her mother had “set us an example of careful courtesy,” explaining “how kind country people were, how helpful to each other, how sterling were their qualities of character, how hard working.” Annette Lumpkin told her daughter “We must never hurt their feelings by holding ourselves ‘above them’ so that they could notice it.” Those last six words allowed Annette Lumpkin to insinuate her family’s superiority without explicitly stating it. It also conveyed the paternalistic message that it was their Christian duty to translate class difference into social responsibility and moral uplift.²⁴

Unbeknownst to Lumpkin, the elite Southern interpretation of the Lost Cause, as relayed by her parents, had already fallen under attack. In the 1890s, Populist reformers concerned about rapidly changing technologies and corporate greed questioned the structures that promoted the elite at the expense of the common man. On the Sand Hills farm, young Katharine experienced a microcosm of these social and economic pressures when her parents

²⁴ Lumpkin, *Making*, 151, 171, 183.

required their children's help on the farm—a circumstance that would not have happened in Georgia.²⁵

Lumpkin soon wearied of farming's demands and the Sand Hills school offered a welcome respite from physical labor. Yet here it became clear, even to a child, the reality of working class Southern experience conflicted with the pastoral picture of southern plantation life that lived on in her parents' memory. Lumpkin thought her classmates epitomized "real 'sand-hillers,'" with their "pasty faces, scrawny necks, angular ill-nourished frames, [and] straw-like hair." At school the children were serious, with little interest in play, and Lumpkin quickly realized the impoverished state of her would-be playmates. "Seeing it and liking them," she thought, "my mind was stirred against what I saw—at deep levels perhaps, not consciously—in this 'the best country and people.'" The poverty she witnessed revealed to Lumpkin the falsehood of the idea that strict adherence to racial, social and gender mores would result in peace and economic prosperity for all.²⁶

Aside from noting that the quality of her clothing and lunches far exceeded anything her peers possessed, Lumpkin began to rue differences in her manners that set her apart. At first the Sand Hills children stared at Lumpkin every time she spoke, but eventually they avoided her altogether. She imagined that her grammatically correct patterns of speech made it seem to them as if she was "putting on airs." "It became important to me to not be excluded," she remembered. "They were my schoolmates. I wanted them to like me." Yet it

²⁵ Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 12; Lumpkin, *Making*, 154.

²⁶ Lumpkin, *Making*, 151, 171; Mark Fannin, *Labor's Promised Land: Radical Visions of Gender, Race and Religion in the South*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003), xv, 8.

was her academic prowess, more than anything else, that disturbed Lumpkin. Lumpkin later felt as though her family's commitment to women's education had given her "a pre-arranged advantage." Lumpkin remembered her mother's education as a "prized family possession," and the family placed an equally high value on the instruction of their daughters. Though elementary schooling took place among poor children in the country, additional, religiously themed instruction took place in the home. Lumpkin's mother would read aloud to her children on Sundays, and *Pilgrim's Progress* was a family favorite. Full of biblical allegory optimistically proclaiming the message that sufferings in this world would be redeemed in the next, Lumpkin may have noted the parallels between Christian's quest for truth and the one on which she was about to embark.²⁷

Until the Sand Hills, Lumpkin had accepted the scriptural teaching "the poor ye always have with you," but she found it easier to apply this maxim to African American poverty than to the destitution of poor whites. She would later credit the poverty she witnessed in her new community with opening her eyes to consciousness of class, saying, "I never again could return to the comfortable ignorance [of] the destitution, the drabness of life, the spiritual and material exploitation, which was the lot of so many [southerners]." Lumpkin's early experience of family and community life in the Carolina Sand Hills illustrates how upper-middle class Christian families tried to square religious belief with the

²⁷ Lumpkin, *Making*, 158-60; Lumpkin, Interview.

mythology of southern prosperity. The obvious and persistent deprivation of the white working class, however, sullied the myth and underscored the need for change.²⁸

Awakening to Religion: Sand Hills Revival

Although she accepted her mother's teachings on social responsibility, Katharine Lumpkin summarily rejected the implicit connection between paternalism and religion she witnessed in their Sand Hills Baptist church. The minister, a section boss on the railroad, had ten children, a pregnant wife, and a house owned by the company. He, like many Piedmont workers, suffered from the "calculating religiosity" and "liturgical zeal" of the type of Piedmont industrialist who paid workers cash for learning the catechism. To Lumpkin, the minister seemed less a beneficiary of corporate religious paternalism than "a stricken man who must fulfill his bounden duty to God."²⁹

Yet something beyond company control troubled Lumpkin here as well. Carolina journalist Jonathan Daniels would later elucidate on important denominational differences between Carolina communities when he noted,

The Piedmont [has] always been a more serious minded land. Somehow, the Episcopalians, though they are relatively few in number, seem to have marked the East, not as a church but as a people. In contrast, the Piedmont seems more

²⁸ Lumpkin, Interview; Lumpkin, *Making*, 171, 239; Jarod Roll echoes Lumpkin's sentiment about the exploitation of southern workers. Like Lumpkin, Roll's labor prophets "stood as prophetic witnesses against a world where the relationship between human effort and basic fairness had come unhinged;" Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 7-8.

²⁹ Lumpkin, *Making*, 162-63; Allen Tullos, *Habits of Industry: White Culture and the Transformation of the Carolina Piedmont* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 15, 37.

directly to have grown from the stern spirits of the Quakers of Guilford, the Moravians of Forsyth, the Calvinists of Mecklenburg, the ubiquitous Baptists, and that practical Methodism from which the Dukes emerged.

Even where denominational difference was less apparent Piedmont churches seemed severe, and frequently authoritarian to outsiders. Lumpkin recalled that her family would have preferred to worship at an Episcopalian church, but the nearest was twelve miles away. So, out of deference to local convention, the Lumpkins attended the Baptist church because “it was seemly. People would not have understood if we had failed to do so.”³⁰

In the Sand Hills, the month of August, when “the harvest was rich,” meant revival. The Lumpkins enjoyed the brilliance of the stars from their front porch on cool evenings and, on revival nights, the sound of Negro spirituals from a nearby church mingled with the song of frogs from the creek. Frequently, however, the family was not present to hear this musical duet as they had bowed to social obligations to attend the white Baptist church. At revival time, “almost everyone came,” Lumpkin remembered, “save a few special sinners, and everyone knew why they did not come.” More important than who was physically present, however, was the ever-present question of whether “sinners” would come to repentance. The minister preached a message full of Calvinistic warnings. He told his flock he was “borne down with that sense of duty and the everlasting hell awaiting any who failed to perform it.” Due to what she thought of as an Episcopalian immunity, Lumpkin did not sense the same “feeling of danger and fear, which sent shivers down the spines of these country people, lest some poor souls among us should die unsaved.” Although curiously unmoved at the time, in

³⁰ Lumpkin, *Making*, 162-63; Jonathan Daniels, “Tar Heels All,” in Federal Writers’ Project, *North Carolina*, p. 4, Federal Writers’ Project Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina; Tullos, *Habits of Industry*, 51.

later years she would perceive this call to faith as an act of social conformity to which she seemed invulnerable. “I had felt many stirrings of embarrassment for others who had been converted, my schoolmates especially; it seemed so public somehow to my Episcopal soul.”³¹

Within the broad category of “sins,” preached against at the Sand Hills Baptist church, there existed a gendered hierarchy. The community openly acknowledged drinking as a sin but, since primarily men committed it, “drunkenness was talked about almost boldly.” “Men played cards and threw dice, and these deeds were wicked; it was a dark sin to do either. But these too were almost open sins, freely admitted when men and boys came up to be saved.” Those unfortunate few who were ““living in sin,”” however, “that occasional woman or girl who was free with her virtue” were treated quite differently by the community. Lumpkin remembered “their sins were not paraded openly, yet nothing seemed more pervasive of our country than the presence of these sinning ones.” Even as a child, Lumpkin quickly learned the lesson she was meant to absorb: “these women were the truly black sinners, for whom hell and eternal damnation were almost certainly the penalty.”³²

Most terrible of all these female wretches were those who flouted the bonds of matrimony. Lumpkin especially recalled an older woman known as “Miss Sarah,” who had lived with a certain farmer for many years “with no marriage words said over them.” Possibly this was done with some intentionality by Sarah, who “walked proudly as if she had nothing to be ashamed of.” “This nonplussed people. She ought to bow her head in shame and did not.” Sarah never attended church during the year, but each August performed

³¹ Lumpkin, *Making*, 161-63; 165-68.

³² *Ibid.*, 164-66.

deliberate acts of passive resistance at the revival meetings, making it a point never to repent or ask forgiveness. “She just came and went away again as if she had a right to.” “She never joined in the singing, never lifted her voice in ‘Amen’ during preaching as many did, just stood there if there was singing or praying, or sat there during the invitation. And after all was over, she left the church directly and alone, with dignity—it must be said, almost with condescension.”³³

Lumpkin’s emphasis on the actions of women the community had labeled “sinners” illustrates how the southern social structure hinged not only upon a strict racial hierarchy, but also upon the virtue of white women. Sarah’s behavior demonstrated her rejection of paternalistic claims that the bonds of holy matrimony could defend white women against sexual predation. Her choice to attend revival, but not repent, reveals her determination to reject social values with which she disagreed, while maintaining a visible commitment to the community through participation in its rituals.

Aside from the ritualistic condemnation of “sinners” like Sarah, the annual revival also functioned as a rite of passage for area youth. Most virtuous of all the white women in the community were its young women and, each year in August, adults hoped their children would prove ripe for conversion. Lumpkin recalled the preacher crying out, “Will you come?” She would apprehensively survey the congregation, wondering if they would. “Jesus is merciful, Jesus will save,” the minister called. If no one responded to his plea the minister would repeat: “Jesus is merciful... Will you come?” Lumpkin thought “he had to make them. What was a revival unless people were saved?” Later, she would candidly describe those

³³ Lumpkin, *Making*, 165-66.

who found it impossible to resist this luring voice: ““Usually they were young people. Most of the older folk years ago had been converted and stayed converted.” Early in the week the rite would begin when “a young girl would go up, her face flushed, her eyes shining; the preacher would take her hand and say, ‘God bless you, daughter,’ and kneel her down at the front bench.” A bit later another adolescent lass “would somehow get the courage. It seemed so plainly to take a kind of courage, even though they were all ready for conversion, being of the right age.” Later in the week, a young boy might “finally pick himself up from the back benches and stumble up the aisle.” His companions would “duck [their heads] and ... fidget: their turn had come and they knew it. Some came, but some were a disappointment, as everyone said after revival. Well, maybe another year...” Lumpkin thought, “save for hardened sinners, it seemed to be expected that the boys would be the last to come to Christ.” In this way, community youth absorbed the lesson that white women provide moral leadership no matter what their age.³⁴

Perhaps because of this special intensity and emphasis upon repentance and conformity, revival in the Sand Hills had none of the customary abandon of revivals Lumpkin later witnessed in other communities where preachers gave a message full of “fervent exultation, with even a sort of joy in it,” and the singing often reached “a pitch of almost wild, solemn fervor.” In its place Lumpkin noticed a “‘tight constriction’ in the people—tensions, suppressed excitement, even fear, that they could not seem to let out.” She wondered what might happen if “the crust might suddenly be burst,” but the people continued their silent struggle against conviction of their sinful nature with the agency of free

³⁴ Lumpkin, *Making*, 166-68.

will, and the preacher found he “could not break through the thick encrusted reticence even with the power of religious emotion.” Torn by her allegiance to Christianity and her emerging awareness of religion’s power as a tool of social conformity, Lumpkin recalled never knowing “whether I wanted them to come or to resist this luring voice pushing against them.”³⁵

Lumpkin later interpreted her conflicted emotions about the Sand Hills Baptist Church as the product of denominational distinctions. While Lumpkin assumed belief systems in both churches to be very much the same, she noted vast differences in scriptural interpretation. In the Episcopalian church where she had been raised, “our theological tenets had sifted as softly into my consciousness as snow floats down on a still winter night.” Lumpkin later thought that “the Sand Hill religion had been my undoing. What I knew was sedate Episcopal ways. I was unaccustomed to the word ‘conversion;’ it was something to feel reticent about.” In the Sand Hills, however, “I saw and heard what purported to be the same religion I believed in, but it seemed very changed.” “[It] seemed to awaken antagonistic responses in my mind, hearing [it] as I did against the sound of flat, hopeless voices singing: ‘Wash me whiter than the snow.’” Lumpkin felt “as if a trap had been laid for [the people], which all unwarily they had walked into.”³⁶

³⁵ Lumpkin, *Making*, 167-69; Tullos, *Habits of Industry*, 64.

³⁶ Lumpkin, *Making*, 173, 183-85; Fellow YWCA activist, Lois MacDonald, noted a similar apathy among Piedmont millworkers, which she attributed to the overt paternalistic influence of mill churches; Lois MacDonald, *Southern Mill Hills: A Study of Social and Economic Forces in Certain Textile Mill Villages*, (New York: Alex L. Hillman, 1928), 11-12, 55-58, 71, 78-79, 98, 151.

Though Lumpkin thought of the distinction between her Episcopalian church and the Sand Hills Baptist church as denominational, more likely the oppressiveness she felt in the Sand Hills resulted from the poverty of its members and its domination by the local railroad company. Historians have found a strong relationship, among churches in the Carolina Piedmont, between denomination and social class. In his study of churches in Gaston County, North Carolina, historian Liston Pope noted that industrialization had produced a proliferation of denominations, with “wide social differences” manifesting between Presbyterians, Methodists, Lutherans and Baptists. Furthermore, Pope noted that “individual churches in the county are mostly class churches, irrespective of denominational affiliation.” The conflicted emotions Lumpkin developed about religion in the Sand Hills church reveals her emerging understanding of not only the role of class in Southern society, but also of religion’s power as a mainstay of the status quo.³⁷

Katharine Lumpkin credits her years in the Sand Hills with awakening her conscience to social disparity and leading her to reject southern gender, social and racial mores. Once, she had been “a Southerner nurtured in the Lost Cause, who looked upon [her] people’s history and conduct of affairs as scarcely short of exemplary.” Yet this paradigm of southern exceptionalism, when juxtaposed with the reality of rural South Carolina life, did not survive close scrutiny. The poverty she perceived in the Sand Hills, as well as the racism she witnessed in her own family, aroused in Lumpkin an “awakened skepticism.” She later used a religious metaphor to describe this awakening as: “a moment when chance circumstances

³⁷ Lumpkin, *Making*, 167-68; Liston Pope, *Millhands and Preachers* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1942), 96, 99, 159.

showed me our native Tree of Life, and had me eat of its revealing fruit.” In this atypical Garden of Eden, Lumpkin’s “eyes had been opened,” and she would never “return to the comfortable ignorance which would have let me assume as an unfortunate inevitability the destitution, the drabness of life, the spiritual and material exploitation, which was the lot of so many.”³⁸

Myra Page

Though her parents christened their eldest child Dorothy Page Gary, Myra Page later adopted her mother’s maiden name as her own in order to protect her genteel family from the intense scrutiny engendered by her radical writings. Her contributions to the Southern Front come from her reform efforts as Industrial Secretary for the YWCA, her work with incarcerated girls, and labor organizing in the 1920s. By the 1930s, Page began writing for the labor press and published her most famous work of fiction, *Gathering Storm: A Story of the Black Belt*, in 1932. The tale explored class, gender and racial conflict in a Carolina cotton mill town from the perspective of a young mill girl. Bursting with proletarian themes and gender angst, the novel reveals a Myra Page already fully committed to the values of working class revolution. But how did she arrive at this juncture from an upper-middle class

³⁸ Lumpkin, *Making*, 239; Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “Women Writers,” 12.

Southern heritage? Later chapters will place Page's activism within the framework of the Southern Front; this section will uncover her awakening to the need for social change.³⁹

Awakening to Gender and Paternalism: Doctor Gary

Myra Page grew up in turn-of-the century Newport News, Virginia, a bustling seaport town located on the James River. From 1900 to 1908 the city's population grew from 20,000 to 30,000 in response to the availability of shipbuilding work. The rapid influx of so many blue-collar workers laboring to build vessels for military and industrial use placed strains on Jim Crow-segregated neighborhoods and businesses. In order to maintain the strict social boundaries required by segregation, the citizens of Newport News began to separate geographically, as well as socially. Wealthy white families, like Page's, responded by building homes on the river, while white dockworkers lived in hastily constructed dwellings near the shipyards euphemistically referred to as Dry Dock Row. Blacks commuted to their jobs on the docks or in the homes of the wealthy from an area called Rocketts, located on the far side of the Ohio railroad tracks.⁴⁰

³⁹ Myra Page Interview with Mary Frederickson, July 12, 1975, G-0042, in the Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (hereafter referred to as "Page, Interview, 1975"); Dorothy Myra Page, *Gathering Storm: A Story of the Black Belt*, (New York: International Publishers, 1932); Mary Frederickson, "Myra Page: Daughter of the South, Worker for Change," *Southern Changes*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 1983, pp. 10-12, 14-15.

⁴⁰ Christina Looper Baker, *In a Generous Spirit: A First-Person Biography of Myra Page* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 21.

In Page's youth, the Gary family had not yet attained their water view; instead they resided near the shipyards where many of her father's clients lived and worked. The geographic proximity of middle and working-class neighborhoods in pre-boom Newport News meant that less visible class and racial boundaries sharply defined children's worlds when topography could not. White families had very little interaction with blacks unless in the context of household work. Because of her father's work, however, Page's experience proved somewhat atypical. As the children of a doctor who regularly treated patients outside his class, Page and her younger brother were allowed to play with the children of African Americans and Irish dockworkers when they went on house calls with their father. Page thought of her father as "very humanitarian...the old-fashioned type of doctor who went whether you had the money or not." "A family doctor then was almost like a preacher, you know. They would confide in him." Many African Americans appreciated his kindness and attended his memorial service.⁴¹

Page greatly admired Doctor Gary's compassion for his patients and his easy rapport with them. The good doctor maintained the same manner with his children, frequently referring affectionately to Page as a "chip off the old block." With her quick-wit, insatiable curiosity, and compassion for others, the young girl decided that she was rather well suited for the medical profession. She imagined that she would join her father in the family business until one day, on a house call near Rocketts, Page's childish expectations suddenly shattered. While she and her younger brother, Barham, waited in the buggy, the boy taunted his older sister with an inescapable truth of Southern life: when they were older, he claimed, *he* would

⁴¹ Page, Interview, 1975.

have an exciting life, with a horse and carriage like their father's, while *she* would only be a housewife. When her father returned to the carriage, Page asked whether her brother's mean-spirited accusations were true. The good doctor devastated all the young girl's illusions when he casually remarked, "your mother and I thought that our first child would be [a] boy," he declared, "then, *you* could have been the doctor."⁴²

With her world quite suddenly turned upside down, young Page swallowed her rage until her father's next call. While he was inside the home, Page was left alone with her brother's insults once again, and she persuaded their horse to run. The vehicle containing the two white children careened wildly toward the black section of town, nearly colliding with a streetcar full of people. It took the intervention of two African Americans to stop the child's mad caper, one of whom was dragged a great distance. Page remained deeply affected by this incident. She understood that she had risked her own life, and that of others, but as a child could not comprehend the source of the disappointment that drove her to such desperation. Later in life Page attributed her brother's provocative behavior toward his sisters as a remnant of the humiliations of the Civil War, which made Southern men "feel disgraced, demoted, and defensive and take it out on other people."⁴³

Awakening to Race: Belle Franklin

Page explained her awakening to race as something "big and ugly" that descended

⁴² Baker, *In a Generous Spirit*, 16-17.

⁴³ Frederickson, "Myra Page," 12; Baker, *In a Generous Spirit*, 16-17; Page, Interview, 1975.

upon her with a “great unnamed misery.” During summers spent on her grandfather’s farm, Page and her brother, Barham, used to play with an African American boy who worked for her grandfather. The adults tolerated this form of recreation for a time, but when Page reached adolescence, the friendship was suddenly forbidden and the children were told the boy would lose his job on the farm if they were caught playing together. Page later wrote of this experience as one that “awoke in me a vast incoherent questioning and hate.”⁴⁴

Page’s relationship with the family’s African American housekeeper, Belle Franklin, compounded these emotions. Page remembered Franklin as having hair, eyes, and skin that were all “beautiful shades of brown.” Franklin also had a fine voice, and the pair used to sing hymns, folk songs, and spirituals in the kitchen while Franklin kneaded the dough for supper. During these intimate moments Franklin shared stories from her childhood with Page. As a young girl growing up in the country, Franklin had been severely whipped by her grandmother for “sassing a white boy.” When Page asked what the boy had done, Franklin admitted he had stoned her pet chicken. Young Page could not imagine why this injustice had been allowed to stand, but Franklin understood from that early experience a lesson that her grandmother intended to stand her in good stead throughout her life of service in white households: “no matter what, you don’t sass a white.”⁴⁵

Despite the remarkable difference in their backgrounds, the bond between Page and Franklin deepened after the incident in Rocketts. As a black woman living in the Jim Crow South, Franklin intimately understood the “yearning for things [she] could not have.” Thus

⁴⁴ Frederickson, “Myra Page,” 11, 14.

⁴⁵ Page, Interview, 1975.

she comprehended, even when others did not, the depth of Page's disappointment in her thwarted professional ambitions. Page later realized that Franklin's intimate knowledge of injustice had created a bond between them that helped the young girl to understand her housekeeper's plight; and she thought her own experience with gender discrimination enhanced her sensitivity to the triple discrimination that Franklin faced as a working class black woman. This type of intersectionality adds new levels of complexity to historian Glenda Gilmore's assertion that "most white women simply could not overcome the racial contexts in which they lived, even if they had thought to try." Though the white women Gilmore studied in turn-of-the-century white supremacy campaigns had learned to rely on white men for political privileges, Myra Page fits into a much smaller, yet active, group of white women who "changed over time, broke with white men, and responded to black women's efforts."⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Page, Interview, 1975; Kimberle Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* 140 (1989): 139-167; Frederickson, "Myra Page," 14; Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), xix-xx, 117; In 1934, contemporary reviewer of Lumpkin and Page's work, E. A. Schachner, wrote that the gendered constraints of elite white women's worlds "created a sensitivity among them to the situation of black and white workers;" E. A. Schachner, "Revolutionary Literature in the United States Today," *Windsor Quarterly* 2 (Spring 1934): 27-64.

Awakening to Class: Dry Dock Row

In addition to her crash course in the Jim Crow gender and racial divide, house calls with her father also attuned Page to class difference at an early age. When she accompanied Doctor Gary to the poverty-stricken abodes of workers in the Irish shantytown known as Dry Dock Row, Page sometimes went inside the home while her father ministered to its occupants. Real estate speculators frequently purchased blocks of row houses at a time in this neighborhood, paying rock-bottom prices and providing little in the way of amenities in return. Page found that most Row homes had no running water and many families did not have enough to eat, circumstances which may account for Doctor Gary's frequent presence in the neighborhood. On other occasions, Page remained in the carriage and "saw things from an angle that most young white girls didn't see." Witnessing these abysmal living conditions stimulated Page's thinking about class. "We were a middle-class family who never went without meals," she realized, "while many shipyard families had no food," and often went without other necessities.⁴⁷

Page had a friend from Dry Dock Row who could not come to school when it rained because the soles of her shoes were made from paper. When Page asked her father why Erma did not have any "real shoes," Doctor Gary offered to buy a pair for his daughter's friend. Not content with her victory, Page pointed out that many other children in the neighborhood also found themselves in the same precarious situation: unable to acquire education because

⁴⁷ Baker, *In a Generous Spirit*, 22; Page, Interview, 1975; "A \$20,000 Deal," *Newport News Daily Press*, July 20, 1906.

of the material disadvantages which education would help to remedy. The child's perception caused Page's father to express defeat and resentment, defensively stating "I can't take care of them all." Page understood the limitations on their family's budget included saving for a house on the river, but even so, the conversation stimulated her to think about the noblesse oblige inherent in a system that instilled in the upper classes the necessity of helping those "beneath them," while making it impossible to effect any real change. These ruminations, when revealed to her father, prompted Christian wisdom designed to explicate the state of Southern social relations: "Don't worry your head about those things, child," the good doctor reassured her, "It's always been, and it will always be. The Bible says, 'The poor ye shall have with you always.'"

Page later reflected on her father's wisdom, "I took seriously the principles of the New Testament, but still it didn't seem right." As a thoughtful child, Page refused to accept social mores that instructed her to care for the poor while rationalizing the continued existence of poverty as God's will. Instead, she began to refashion her own religious identity to address her social concerns. In the future, Page would selectively apply biblical teachings that addressed the social problems she witnessed, incorporating them into a moral code that, for her, eventually transcended the narrow bounds of traditional Southern Christianity.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Baker, *In a Generous Spirit*, 22.

Conclusion

The celebrated African American theologian, Howard Thurman, in his insightful interrogation of segregation, *The Luminous Darkness*, outlined three means by which whites might attempt to rationalize segregation: they may “accept the fact and the station,” display “a resentful helplessness,” or “recognize it for what it is, a wall that [their] own insecurity holds in place, and [they] may seek in all ways possible to remove it.” Suffused by Lost Cause explanations of their family’s place in society, Katharine Lumpkin’s family followed the first path. Seemingly unaware of the glaring contradictions between their Lost Cause interpretation of southern life and the reality of the poverty and racial intolerance that surrounded them, they proceeded to accept Jim Crow at face value. Dr. Gary believed in helping individuals, but felt powerless to change the system that made his efforts so necessary. In this way he displays the resentful helplessness that spurred his daughter to find a better way of making a difference.⁴⁹

Their daughters, however, and a handful of Southern middle-class women like them, recognized fault lines in the previously impervious wall of Jim Crow. Like divers probing the depths of southern racism, they confronted the darkness and began chipping at the fault lines they had observed in Jim Crow from a Christian perspective. As they moved away from their families and into their college years, Lumpkin’s and Page’s experience in the Christian social reform movement would be as fraught with race, class, gender and religion tensions as had

⁴⁹ Howard Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), vii-viii. 59, 65, 78.

been their experience growing up in the South. These experiences, however, would both contribute to their own personal radicalism, and inform their eventual contributions to the Southern Front.

CHAPTER II: CONVERSION

To be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain an assurance, are so many phrases which denote the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities. This at least is what conversion signifies in general terms, whether or not we believe that a direct divine operation is needed to bring such a moral change about.

--William James⁵⁰

In the 1920s, the institutional structure of the evangelical, non-denominational Social Gospel movement offered southern women new means to escape patriarchal boundaries in their own lives and simultaneously work toward industrial and racial reform. Between World War I and World War II, Christian organizations like the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) offered educational and professional opportunities not previously available to middle-class women. Through participation in frank discussions about race with African American college women, as well as in sharing factory work with industrial women, elite southern women took advantage of new opportunities to experience, and promote, change.⁵¹

The first chapter of this study observed that middle-class southern women, like Lumpkin and Page, came of age within the context of a Lost Cause narrative that both justified the racial stratification of Jim Crow and cemented gender roles. A middle-class woman's duty within this system included responsibility toward the poor based upon their

⁵⁰ William James, *the Varieties of Religious Experience*, in *The Works of William James*, vol. 15 (Cambridge, Mass., 1985), 189.

⁵¹ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign Against Lynching* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979) 66.

privileged class position. Christian social reform was so prevalent in the South by the 1920s that involvement in the movement did not necessarily represent a break with social norms. To a large extent, then, middle class Christian women's participation in the Social Gospel movement, while undoubtedly liberating, also logically followed from what they had learned under the regnant system of southern paternalism.

What seems more surprising, on its face, is the later "conversion" on the part of some of these reformers from Christianity to what many southerners attacked at the time as the "foreign religion" of Communism. This chapter seeks to explain that transformation by demonstrating how YWCA involvement opened Page's and Lumpkin's eyes to the problems, both internal and external, with Christian social reform, and stimulated their "conversion" to more radical forms of social engagement.

Southern College Women and "The Race Question"

In 1912, Katharine Lumpkin completed her exile in the South Carolina Sand Hills and reached the promised land of Brenau College in Gainesville, Georgia. Lumpkin arrived in Georgia still nurturing remnants of the idea that she "belonged to a people of a special mold." She later recalled, "In my head I carried the picture of the Southerner which we cherished, and whose likeness we had been reared to aspire to—of affectionate, withal proud, and of noble spirit and high ideals." Lumpkin's college experience reinforced those convictions. In the Sand Hills, Lumpkin frequently had to spell her unfamiliar last name, but at Brenau her surname granted near-celebrity status, as many of her peers hailed from nearby Lumpkin

County or the town of Lumpkin. Three years of coursework and two subsequent years of tutoring continually reminded Lumpkin of her family's privileged place in history, and she basked in enjoyment of "the place that we of my name always had felt was home."⁵²

While the years at Brenau reinforced Lumpkin's appreciation of the privilege her class position afforded, they also provided her first exposure to the message of the Social Gospel. The movement had arrived late in the South. Just after the Civil War northerners framed their denunciation of industrial problems using the language of Protestantism. Northern social reformers employed gospel arguments about the value of labor to construct a Christian critique of capitalism that encouraged owners of the means of production to heed workers' calls for higher wages, shorter hours and safer working environments. By the turn of the century, progressive southern clubwomen had adopted the cause, but the Social Gospel message did not arrive in southern women's colleges until the First World War. American women during the war expressed their patriotic feeling and their independence through federal agencies, like the Women's Committee, the National Liberty Loan Campaign, or the United War Savings Stamps Program, as well as through privately funded organizations like the Red Cross or YWCA. The YWCA maintained programs for American soldiers abroad, but they also focused on domestic industrial problems caused by wartime acceleration of production.⁵³

⁵² Katharine Du Pre Lumpkin, *The Making of a Southerner* (1946; Reprint, Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1974), 177-78.

⁵³ For more on the Social Gospel movement in the North, see C. Howard Hopkins, *The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism, 1865-1915* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940); For a detailed analysis of the influence of the Social Gospel on working-class and middle-class reformers in Boston during the late nineteenth century, see David A.

After the turn of the century, the primary means by which southern women influenced social problems was through the Protestant missionary societies and YWCAs. World War I popularized the latter, as students began to reject foreign mission work that only attempted to win souls for Christ abroad, while ignoring problems of industrialization at home. YWCA programs provided opportunities for southern women to express their patriotism and domestic reform impulse through active civic engagement aimed at improving the conditions of workers engaged in domestic war production. For Katharine Lumpkin and her peers, who were in college during the war, discovery of the Christian social reform movement fell little short of a conversion experience. Lumpkin recalled this period as “a very exciting time for young people,” a time when the atmosphere was “ripe” with the Social Gospel message and they listened to it with “rapt attention.” Having rejected the fundamentalist Christianity of the Sand Hills, Lumpkin now embraced the Social Gospel with determination and enthusiasm, rejoicing in her discovery of a way to fulfill her youthful desire to mould her faith and suit her sense of social responsibility.⁵⁴

Within the social gospel message, Lumpkin encountered “contrary streams of influence” that produced in her a “second awakening to a consciousness of race.” She met YWCA personnel whom she thought of as “far-thinking women.” They convinced her to

Zonderman, *Uneasy Allies: Working for Labor Reform in Nineteenth-Century Boston* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011), 224-27; Lumpkin, SOHP interview; Nikki Brown, *Private Politics and Public Voices: Black Women’s Activism from World War I to the New Deal* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 73-74.

⁵⁴ For an excellent description of women’s social reform efforts in Texas during this period, see Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry*, 65-66; Katharine Du Pre Lumpkin, Interview by Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, August 4, 1974, Southern Oral History Program, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (hereafter cited as “Lumpkin, Interview, 1974.”)

serve as president of the Brenau local during her senior year in college and for two years after. Late in 1915, at a conference in Charlotte, North Carolina, YWCA leadership presented Lumpkin and her colleagues with the ultimate dilemma for southern women. They asked the young women to listen to a lecture on “the race problem” given by an African American to whom they were asked to refer as “Miss Arthur.” Lumpkin thought if the group leader had simply referred to her as “‘Jane Arthur,’ our sense of foreboding would not have been so great. We could go away and forget a ‘Mary’ or a ‘Jane.’ We had known and forgotten tens of thousands of Negro Marys and Janes. But how to forget a ‘Miss Arthur?’” As Arthur spoke, Lumpkin found herself wondering, “If I should close my eyes, would I know whether she was a white or Negro?” When the event ended, Lumpkin opened her eyes to find “the heavens had not fallen, nor the earth parted asunder to swallow us up in this unheard of transgression.” In this encounter, Lumpkin later described herself and her peers as “a little company of Eves,” who found themselves “called upon to pluck from the Tree of Life the apple that would open our eyes to see what was good and evil.”⁵⁵

After her “second awakening” to the cruel realities of racism in the South, Katharine Lumpkin travelled to New York to attend graduate school at Columbia. Here she encountered a central paradox concerning matters of race: while northerners almost universally professed an aversion to racial discrimination, most also actively practiced it in their daily lives. The northerners she met in college led Lumpkin to believe that African Americans found more equitable treatment in this “far friendlier territory stretching away beyond Mason-Dixon’s line.” Upon her arrival, however, Lumpkin began to understand that racism was a national,

⁵⁵ Lumpkin, *Making*, 178, 189, 191-93.

rather than a sectional, problem. She encountered northerners who “aped our Southern ways, took over our terminology bodily, saying ‘darkey,’ and even ‘nigger.’ To my scorn, some said ‘coon,’ a term we never used.” Lumpkin’s experience in New York quickly dispelled her illusion that “all Northerners were the self-ordained champions of Negro slave and Negro freedman.” When she began to feel a “sense of shame for them,” she knew that it was time to take leave of this over-celebrated “promised land.”⁵⁶

After receiving her Master’s degree in sociology from Columbia, Lumpkin returned to the YWCA as Student Committee Secretary for the southern region. Her responsibilities included organizing college women and introducing them to a more varied perspective on race and industrial work than those to which they had been exposed as elites in the Jim Crow South. In 1923, Lumpkin travelled to several colleges with an African American YWCA counterpart who organized at the black women’s colleges, Juliette Derricotte. In each small group setting, Derricotte “gave the group a statement of various points of view that she found among colored students regarding the race question. This was followed by opportunity for discussion and questions.” During the visits, Lumpkin and Derricotte encouraged college women to shed their preconceptions and confront the subject of race relationships from a Christian perspective. Lumpkin recalled she and Derricotte did not expect the students to completely revise their attitudes about race overnight, but they did hope the discussion might

⁵⁶ Lumpkin, *Making*, 202-03; Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008), xiii- xv.

“start a process of thinking and deep concern” that “might some day result in real conviction.”⁵⁷

After a visit to Hollins College, in Roanoke, Virginia, and North Carolina College for Women, in Greensboro, North Carolina, Lumpkin cheerily reported, “[students] who heard Miss Derricotte speak, [have] begun to view the whole situation from an entirely new angle, and those who never viewed it from any particular angle at all were startled into some line of thinking at least.” In a summary of her findings, she called the trip a “vivid and stirring experience.” Though she deliberately kept her expectations low, Lumpkin wanted nothing less than to begin a revival among white southern college women: “I do not find Christian students today awaking to present day issues thru [sic] theoretical presentation of them,” she reported. “They are impressed; they are relatively altruistic in their feelings; and all of that is good; but they are rarely set ‘on fire’ to bring in a new day.” Through her work with Derricotte, however, Lumpkin hoped to kindle such a blaze. She wanted to “bring together those representing these different groups, and have them think, study, discuss, work together,” hoping that, for many, this process would result in “a new and vivid conviction of the need for a changed society.” Lumpkin felt that “God means his people to recognize there

⁵⁷ Report of Katharine D. Lumpkin, Secretary of the YWCA Student Committee to the National Board of the YWCA, March 1923, (hereafter cited as “Report on Race”), Katharine Du Pre Lumpkin papers, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (hereafter cited as Katharine Lumpkin papers).

are no real barriers, no fundamental differences, that we must come to the time of living together in the world as ‘under heaven one family.’”⁵⁸

Though Lumpkin remained passionate about her goal of transforming hearts and minds, she also wisely cautioned her supervisors at the national YWCA against stressing an approach to race relations based on moral uplift. “We must do all possible to have individuals come out of [interracial meetings] with a clean-cut Jesus-like respect for personality,” Lumpkin advised. Cognizant of an attitude popularized by Booker T. Washington, which advocated self-improvement based on principles of Christian moral character and individual economy, Lumpkin warned that the YWCA’s methodology should have little traffic with such “paternalistic, ‘welfare’ or sentimental attitudes.”⁵⁹

Despite Lumpkin’s clear-headed thinking about how to alter white college women’s impressions of blacks, she also felt this change needed to take place within the elitist hierarchy with which most students were already familiar. Lumpkin reported to the YWCA “almost no Southern students have ever had the chance to converse with or know in any way members of the Negro race.” She therefore recommended a selection process whereby students would see “some of the real ‘best’ that is potential” in the other group. However much she rejected strategies of moral uplift, Lumpkin remained limited by a philosophy common in her day, and popularized by W. E. B. Du Bois: the principle of the black

⁵⁸ Juliette Derricotte, “Interracial Work in Southern Region,” Katharine Lumpkin papers (hereafter cited as “Interracial Work”); Katharine Lumpkin, “Report on Race,” Katharine Lumpkin papers.

⁵⁹ Katharine Lumpkin, “Report on Race,” Katharine Lumpkin papers; Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004), 46.

“talented tenth.” She firmly believed that “if understanding and right relations – ‘solutions’ – were to come, there had to be a getting together, more and more, of groups and individuals from among the ‘best’ of the two races.” Lumpkin accomplished this goal by limiting white students’ interactions with black college women to carefully scripted exchanges with a handful of students whom Juliette Derricotte handpicked for the purpose.⁶⁰

On its surface, Derricotte’s report for the trip took a similarly optimistic tone. To gain a proper perspective on the relationship between the two activists, however, requires paying some attention to what Derricotte did *not* say. By reflecting upon the complex history of black women’s roles within mission-based organizations, as well as upon the social realities of southern segregation at the time, it will be possible to “read between the lines” of Derricotte’s narrative in order to grasp the meaning of her “silence” about black women’s agency within the YWCA.⁶¹

During World War I, African American women viewed the YWCA as an organization that could help them achieve autonomy from male-dominated, church-based organizations. Through its Committee of Colored Women, however, the organization restricted the scope of black women’s involvement by placing limitations on financial resources and maintaining strict rules of segregation between black and white women. Thus, though the YWCA supported Derricotte’s interracial work with Lumpkin, they did so within

⁶⁰ Katharine Lumpkin, “Report on Race,” Katharine Lumpkin papers; Singh, *Black Is a Country*, 47; For an excellent discussion of “The Female Talented Tenth,” see Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), 19-46.

⁶¹ For more on reading into the “silences” of autobiographical material, see Katherine Mellen Charron, *Freedom’s Teacher: The Life of Septima Clark* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 11.

Jim Crow's rigidly enforced boundaries. This was never more apparent than in Derricotte's travels with Lumpkin to colleges in North Carolina and Virginia, where she found southern transportation little changed from the day in 1892 when Homer Plessy took his stand on the East Louisiana Railroad. Though Derricotte failed to mention it in her report, we know from the state of southern segregation laws, and from Myra Page's reports on similar trips during the same period, that Derricotte would have sat up all night in the coach section, while Lumpkin relaxed in the Pullman car.⁶²

Derricotte's report from the trip reflected upon similar work she had done for the YWCA in Kansas. Upon her arrival in the South, she mentally compared southern students to the mid-westerners with whom she was more familiar. The comparison was not favorable. Derricotte quickly discovered that southern students, when compared with their mid-western peers, had "more and different arguments supporting their prejudices." While Lumpkin had expressed pleasure at the "freedom of discussion" generated in their gatherings, Derricotte noted how white southern college women made no attempt to spare her feelings. She recalled

⁶² For an interesting discussion on the political activism of African American women during World War I, see Nikki Brown, *Private Politics and Public Voices: Black Women's Activism from World War I to the New Deal* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 73-74; Myra Page Interview with Mary Frederickson, July 12, 1975, G-0042, in the Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (hereafter referred to as "Page, Interview, 1975"); For the state of southern railway transportation from the Plessy decision to about 1906, see Blair L. M. Kelly, *Right to Ride: Streetcar Boycotts and African American Citizenship in the Era of Plessy v. Ferguson* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 51.

how, in their discussions, “there was no feeling of suppression of thoughts, everyone was quite frank and free.”⁶³

Despite encountering an environment so initially hostile, Derricotte did her part to “sway hearts and minds.” Using a series of examples familiar to college women, Derricotte developed a rhetorical strategy that obliged them to admit “there was no logical basis” for their “theories of limited intelligence, immorality, crime, etc., regarding negroes.” Furthermore, as she deftly pointed out, “white people were more concerned, did more talking, and were the greatest offenders in regard to amalgamation.” Once they had established these crucial points, Derricotte found the young women ready to admit “that all methods of segregation, discrimination, and denial of rights in regard to the negro were upheld for the maintenance of white superiority.”⁶⁴

The sources remain unclear about how much impact her association with Juliette Derricotte had upon Katharine Lumpkin’s later “conversion” to a more radical attitude about race. Though Lumpkin’s colleague in the Southern Front, Lillian Smith, would later explain, “there is no Negro problem,” at this point in their lives, both Lumpkin and Derricotte remained guided by the conclusion that the “problem of race” was rooted in “fear and selfishness.” Their proposed solution to this difficulty followed a fairly predictable Social

⁶³ Katharine Lumpkin, “Report on Race,” Katharine Lumpkin papers; Derricotte, “Interracial Work,” Katharine Lumpkin papers.

⁶⁴ Derricotte, “Interracial Work,” Katharine Lumpkin papers.

Gospel model: to apply “honest Christian thinking” to the problem, while hoping, and praying, to achieve results.⁶⁵

Industrial Women and the Problem of Class

Myra Page met Katharine Lumpkin during the summer of 1920 at Blue Ridge, North Carolina, where approximately 300 college women had gathered at for a weeklong Bible Study Camp under the auspices of the YWCA. During their work with college women in the YWCA, Lumpkin and her sister, Grace, perpetually hunted for southern women who could work in industrial organizing and Page seemed to fit the bill. “Up there in the beautiful rarefied air,” Page recalled, “so many things seemed possible.” One of the new opportunities she encountered involved meeting with black college women to have frank discussions about race. While Page marveled at the progress made among college women at Blue Ridge, she worried that many of the principles of equality established in the mountains would be abandoned when “back into the routine of everyday life.” Others disagreed.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Derricotte, “Interracial Work,” Katharine Lumpkin papers; Lillian Smith, “There is No Negro Problem,” *The New York Age*, December 16, 1944.

⁶⁶ Page, Interview, 1975; Katharine Lumpkin’s Report to the National Board of the YWCA, covering the period from June 15 to August 15, 1920, Katharine Lumpkin papers.



Figure 1. Katharine Du Pre Lumpkin, front, with unidentified students, c. spring 1924, probably at the Blue Ridge Conference Center in the mountains of North Carolina. *Courtesy of the Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.*

Some outside observers of the activities at Blue Ridge expressed concern about the conference's potential for disruption of the southern status quo. Though it would seem there might be little of interest to southern manufacturers in a young women's Bible conference, in June of 1920 the *Manufacturers Record* vociferously objected to the YWCA's activities there. Expressing concern that young women were being "led astray" by the "preaching of socialistic doctrines," the paper railed against the inclusion of one of the conference's

speakers, a Rev. Dr. Hogue, former rector of an Episcopal church in Baltimore. The *Record* described Hogue as “a noted socialistic agitator and a friend and upholder of some of the rankest Socialists in America, such as Debs, Foster and others.”⁶⁷

In case they had missed the issue, the *Manufacturers Record* sent copies of its editorial to the administrators of men’s and women’s colleges across the South, then printed some of their replies. At Hampden-Sidney College, a men’s school in Virginia, the Registrar agreed that socialism appeared to be infiltrating American colleges. He publicly wished for “some emblem or device...which would be the badge of clean, American, Christian instruction...so that no parent might run the risk of unknowingly committing an impressionable, unformed mind to the care of atheistic, socialistic, Bolshevistic influences.” Officials at Agnes Scott College in Decatur, Georgia, however, attempted to set the record straight by declaring that the *Manufacturers Record* had done the YWCA “a grave injustice” in its editorial. Unlike the *Record’s* editor and the other respondents, college President J.R. McCain had actually attended the conference at Blue Ridge. As leader of one of the Bible classes, he had observed the convention’s tenor and had taken careful note of Dr. Hogue’s viewpoints. McCain felt that Hogue’s “emphasis was distinctly social, but I did not observe or hear of any teaching on his part which could be justly condemned as socialistic or dangerous.” McCain effectively championed himself as a witness when he pointed out “the whole tendency of our college is toward the strictest Presbyterian conservatism, so that we would have unquestionably been quick to note any notable radicalism.” A colleague of Page

⁶⁷ “Turning a Y.W.C.A. Convention into a Scheme for Teaching Socialism,” *Manufacturers Record*, June 24, 1920; “Danger of Socialistic Doctrines in Colleges and Christian Association Conventions,” *Manufacturers Record*, August 5, 1920.

and Lumpkin's corroborated McCain's observations of the YWCA's work: "the Y was attacked as being too pro-labor and too liberal," she remembered, "there were questions of whether we were religious enough."⁶⁸

Page first learned of the problems of southern industrial women during her summer at the Blue Ridge conference. She heard of the dreary working conditions that these workers faced from the women themselves and studied how early southern industrialists had argued that the establishment of cotton mills in the Piedmont would provide employment for poor, white, and otherwise idle, women and children. Their paternalism, however, obscured a more sobering reality. By the 1920s, roughly thirty percent of southern women had entered the work force. In North Carolina, the vast majority of working women operated equipment in cotton mills where they faced eleven-hour work days, increased risk of respiratory infection, low pay, little opportunity to exercise their newfound citizenship rights from living in unincorporated mill hills, and little time for leisure or self-improvement. In their "gaunt looks and sallow skins," Lumpkin would recognize the visage of her unfortunate Sand Hillers.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ "Danger of Socialistic Doctrines in Colleges and Christian Association Conventions," *Manufacturers Record*, August 5, 1920; Mary Frederickson Interview with Eleanor Copenhaver Anderson, November 5, 1974, Southern Oral History Program Collection, University of North Carolina (hereafter cited as "Eleanor Copenhaver Anderson, Interview, 1974.")

⁶⁹ Elizabeth L. Otey, "Women and Children in Southern Industry," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 153, "The Coming of Industry to the South," (Jan., 1931): 163, 165, 167; Otey writes "the maximum hours of work fixed by law in 1907 in cotton mills were...sixty-six in North Carolina." Twenty-three years later, in 1931, North Carolina still permitted an eleven-hour day. The eight-hour day, with one guaranteed day off per week, was still non-existent, even though ten other states had eight-hour laws in many industries by that time.

While at college in Richmond, Virginia, Page had noted a similar hypocritical attitude on the part of some southern bosses. She especially remembered attending church with her mother's cousin, Basil, who managed the Southern Biscuit Company. She noted that her cousin seemed moved to tears each Sunday by the beauty of the gospel message, yet during the week he displayed no sympathy for the women he employed. Page marveled at her cousin's hypocrisy, remembering that he "was nice to me and to my friends, but he had no feeling or sense of responsibility for workers."⁷⁰

Wanting to ameliorate the pitiable conditions for industrial women that she learned about at the conference and apply the gospel message in her own way, Page returned to her hometown of Norfolk, Virginia to organize "clubs of business girls and industrial girls" for the YWCA's Labor Organizing School for Industrial Women. The Labor Organizing School began in 1919 as a means of demonstrating to elite college women "who have missed much of life's drudgery" exactly "what it means to be a part of the present industrial system." It sent students into factories and shops at wage-earning occupations in order "that they may share the experiences of women workers on whom they [rely] for many necessities." The YWCA hoped that, through this program, college women would arm themselves with "concrete facts on which to base their study in industrial problems," increase their connections with "those in the industrial world," and begin to associate with "those who seek to transform our social order into the Kingdom of God." By 1924 the YWCA operated student-industrial commissions at Westhampton Women's College in Richmond, Virginia, Randolph Macon Women's College in Lynchburg, Virginia, Hollins College in Roanoke,

⁷⁰ Page, Interview, 1975.

Virginia, Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, Agnes Scott in Atlanta, Georgia, Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, to name only a few.⁷¹

Through the YWCA's industrial program, college women experienced hands-on learning about the problems of industrialism and this knowledge led them to sympathize with the plight of industrial women. As Page and Lumpkin had hoped, one student remarked that the program "has made us realize the immensity and complexity" of "a system, lauded for its efficiency, which makes machines of men and claims the free soul, which breaks down health and gives inadequate pecuniary remuneration, which stifles thought and represses desire." Another student reflected upon her experience with the realities of the industrial system's long hours and division of labor:

I used to think that if a girl were at all ambitious she could read at night or go to school and that it was her own fault if she remained ignorant. But the ignorance was all mine, undoubtedly shared by the public, for a body weary to the point of exhaustion cannot support a mind alert and open to reading. It cannot be done unless the hours are shorter and there is real fascination in one's own job. Even an elastic imagination has to be stretched to the limit to find anything fascinating or romantic about so homely a thing as a mop. Especially at four o'clock in the afternoon when the machines are deafening to one's ears and one's feet are burning and aching.⁷²

The college women's observations reflect an understanding, new to them, but one which northern social reformers apprehended nearly a century earlier: workers could hardly expect to "improve themselves" if they had no leisure time in which to do so. Indeed, the conditions to which Page and Lumpkin gradually acclimated the college women were the

⁷¹ Page, Interview, 1975; Katharine du Pre Lumpkin, "Students in Industry," Promotional Material written for the YWCA (hereafter cited as "Students in Industry"), Katharine Lumpkin Papers.

⁷² Katharine Lumpkin, "Students in Industry," Katharine Lumpkin Papers.

same conditions to which southern industrial workers frequently referred as “wage slavery.” A frequently used trope among various populations of industrial workers across the Piedmont, southern workers often compared the speed up, wherein employers sought to increase their profits by increasing work and reducing workers’ leisure time, to slavery. By comparing themselves to slaves, mill hands indicated that they occupied a class position substantially lower than they believed they deserved. Jim Crow promised whites that, no matter how poor they were, they were still better off than blacks. The reality of southern industrialization, however, had begun to tell a different story.⁷³

Though the YWCA’s program proved educational for college women, critics, including Page, did not feel the organization did enough for working women. The industrial group suffered from internal flaws analogous to those in the student committee: while the problem of racial segregation plagued college conferences, class divisions separated the students from industrial workers. Each year the YWCA sent small delegations of college women to the industrial conference at Lake Junaluska, North Carolina, and an analogous delegation of industrial women visited the students at Blue Ridge. The organizers of each conference tried to ensure that visiting delegates became “a real part of the conference,” by inviting them to small group meetings, including them in jaunts, and encouraging them to sit with different delegations in the dining room. In most cases, visiting delegates were housed with the corresponding delegation from their hometown in an effort to increase familiarity

⁷³A particularly useful example of this trope can be found in Bryant Simon, *A Fabric of Defeat: The Politics of South Carolina Millhands, 1910-1948* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 47-48, where workers compared new policies intended to increase efficiency to “Pharaoh’s treatment of the Israelites,” and “Roman slavery.”

and build cross-culture networks in a given geographical area. The YWCA had hoped their industrial programs would encourage “the growth of understanding and fellowship between the two groups,” but even though college women understood industrial problems intellectually, they had yet to feel a kinship with industrial women in their hearts. At the end of their six-week industrial programs, college women still thought of themselves as members of a separate class that sought “culture and food for thought,” and pitied factory girls who “must seek work and food for their bodies.”⁷⁴

Page could barely contain her disappointment when she discovered that the internal flaws in the Industrial Program had deep roots. When Lumpkin brought her into the organization, Page thought the goal of the Industrial Program was to organize working girls into clubs, preparing them for unionism. After working within the group for only a few months, however, Page realized that the program had succumbed to the employer paternalism and moral uplift characteristic of the women’s club movement.

Genteel women often viewed women’s club work as part of their Christian duty and many of Page’s colleagues in the YWCA believed they had a divine mandate to prevent moral dissolution among working girls. As they were often the daughters of wealthy capitalists, this sensibility played right into the hands of employers. Page’s direct supervisor at the YWCA “believed in paternalism, deep, deep down.” The daughter of a local mill owner, she instructed Page to “teach girls to love God and know their place.” When Page was stationed in a silk factory operated by her manager’s father, Page she did her best to

⁷⁴ Lumpkin, Interview, 1974; Katharine du Pre Lumpkin, “Students in Industry,” Katharine Lumpkin Papers.

encourage workers to take charge of their work lives, but soon discovered she was not making any headway. Page had to get permission to talk with the workers, so the women came to associate her with management. Page's disillusionment with the Social Gospel movement crystallized when she later reflected, "YWCA philosophy held that the world would straighten out by converting souls, one by one, but it became clear to me that wasn't going to happen."⁷⁵

When Page began work for the YWCA Industrial Committee, friends had warned her that the South was a hard region to organize. Witnessing paternalism in action had taught her that principles of moral uplift would not be enough to correct the long hours and low wages that plagued working women. Her experience with the YWCA cemented Page's ideas about the inefficacy of moral uplift programs and led to her final disillusionment with organized religion. She began to think "the future of the country would lie through the workers getting organized and making good sensible reform in the country." When employers and YWCA supervisors accused Page of "preaching unionism" among industrial women, she knew it was time to leave.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Page, Interview, 1975; Priscilla Murolo, *The Common Ground of Womanhood: Class, Gender, and Working Girls' Clubs, 1884-1928* (Urbana: The University of Illinois, 1997), 16-19; Eleanor Copenhaver Anderson, Interview, 1974.

⁷⁶ Myra Page to Mary Frederickson, June 30, 1975, Myra Page Papers, 05143, University of North Carolina Wilson Library, Chapel Hill; Page, Interview, 1975; Baker, *In a Generous Spirit*, 50.

Of a New Heaven and a New Earth

It should be clear by this time that both Lumpkin and Page experienced little sense of deep social change within the Social Gospel movement. When Page left the YWCA she worked for a brief stint in Philadelphia's Wanamaker factory. Disillusioned by her YWCA experience, she thought it would help her learn about industry "from the bottom up." When her sophisticated manner betrayed her educated background, however, supervisors suspected her of union organizing. After her dismissal, Page returned to school and completed a Ph.D. in sociology at the University of Minnesota. While completing the research for her dissertation, Page carried her past experiences with southern industrial life into her work.⁷⁷ In 1926 she completed a study of cotton mill workers in three North Carolina Piedmont towns. The book published from her research details the poverty-stricken condition of mill hill residents and interrogates the role of religion in maintaining their condition. Page found that "Religion exerts a powerful hold over this poverty-ridden people. It is primitive and highly emotional in character, and furnishes the White Trash with a means of temporary oblivion to the harsh facts of their existence." Workers she interviewed made statements such as: "We mustn't concern ourselves with earthly things. It is all in God's hands," and "Unionism might be a good thing but I ain't got no time, my thoughts is all on the world to come."⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Page, Interview, 1975; Myra Page to Mary Frederickson, June 30, 1975, Myra Page Papers, 05143, University of North Carolina Wilson Library, Chapel Hill, Baker, *In a Generous Spirit*, 38.

⁷⁸ Page, Interview, 1975; Myra Page, *Southern Cotton Mills and Labor*, (New York: Workers Library Publishers, 1929), 35, 40, 50; In the opening remarks of *Southern Cotton Mills and Labor* Page clarifies her use of terms. She states that she is simply repeating terminology

Despite her negative experiences in the YWCA, Page remained optimistic that workers' collective organization would remedy the millworkers' fatalistic worldview. She reported, "Over three-fourths of the southern textile workers with whom we talked are dissatisfied with their present lot, and of these one-third have formulated a class philosophy of the reasons for their plight." The Marxist theory Page encountered in graduate school, along with her new husband, Communist John Markey, had convinced her that unionism along class lines, and irrespective of race, represented the only avenue for real social change.⁷⁹

Page's ideals now allied so well with those of the Communist Party that Bill Dunne, a founder of the Communist Labor Party of America and editor of the *Daily Worker* from 1925-1936, in his Forward to *Southern Cotton Mills and Labor*, characterized Page's work as no mere sociological study, but an "incision" into the "body of American imperialism," "sharp and merciless, by a scalpel with a Leninist edge." Page also began to write articles for radical publications like *Crisis* magazine, the *Daily Worker*, *The New Masses* and the *Southern Worker* that underscored her deepening concern with social problems affecting African Americans and the white working class.⁸⁰

As the decade of the twenties drew to a close, Page began to publish fiction that clearly assessed the morality of the present state of industry in the South and optimistically

frequently used by "the rest of the southern population" during the course of her sociological study in the mill town. Her use of "White Trash" in this quotation assumes that the reader understands it is not her own definition; she merely repeats designations assigned by others. Page also referred to herself throughout the book as a "dam Yankee," since that was the term the local sheriff applied to her before he knew understood that she was born in Virginia.

⁷⁹ Page, *Southern Cotton Mills and Labor*, 68.

⁸⁰ Bill Dunne, "Forward," *Southern Cotton Mills and Labor*, 5.

heralded the coming of a new day in which workers would understand the true value of their collective effort and make their voices heard. About her writing in this period she later reflected:

Those of us writing for the movement often discussed proletarian novels and socialist realism. As far as I was concerned, we were trying to find out the truth of life from the point of view of “the people” and to express that truth in writing. We tended to write positively on behalf of the workers. Terms such as *socialist realism* didn’t necessarily prove useful, however, and I never approached writing in that way...I considered myself an artist first, but I don’t separate art from truth. They go together. I would never write anything I didn’t believe was the truth—not just art, but truth. Ellen Glasgow refers to literature as the “illumination of life.” That was it for me—a kind of seeking. I wanted to get hold of life and give it expression.⁸¹

Like Page, Katharine Lumpkin also hoped to better understand and express the experience of industrial women. Taking a leave of absence from the YWCA, she secured work for herself in a Philadelphia shoe factory. Lumpkin intended the experience to enlarge her contacts within the industrial world, but it also led her to realize that her recent YWCA experience was only marginally connected to the “normal life led by the mass of humanity.” She recalled of her experience in the factory:

We were hardly more than instruments, moved helplessly by a larger machine that ran all the smaller ones at which we worked, and which was operated by some remote control, a vast over-all mechanism that was not geared to human consequences. People beside me on the job were being laid off; they had families at home, maybe someone ill; nothing was laid by because it had all been spent at the last layoff; rent was overdue; credit out at the stores. Management would say monotonously: we are sorry; business is poor; come back another time.⁸²

⁸¹ Janet E. Lane, “The Silenced Cry from the Factory Floor: Gastonia’s Female Strikers and their Proletarian Authors” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University of Pennsylvania, 2004), 157, 160; Baker, *In a Generous Spirit*, 110.

⁸² Katharine Lumpkin’s Report to the National Board of the YWCA, covering the period from June 15 to August 15, 1920. Katharine Lumpkin papers at Chapel Hill; Katharine du

Soon after this experience, Lumpkin left the YWCA to pursue a Ph.D. in sociology at the University of Wisconsin and her subsequent writing addressed fundamental problems of American industry. Studies like *The Family: A Study of Member Roles* (1933), and *Child Workers in America* (1937), co-authored with her partner of thirty years, economist Dorothy W. Douglas, explored the connections between capitalism and many of the social ills that plagued American society. Lumpkin brought her critique closer to home with *The South in Progress* (1940) and *The Making of a Southerner* (1947), both of which evaluated the impact of racial inequality on southern workers.

Though Lumpkin never officially acknowledged membership in the Communist Party, her writing and teaching at Wells College in New York so constantly questioned the racial and economic status quo that she became a target in the anti-communist repression of the 1950s. In 1953 a former colleague and Smith College English professor, Robert Gorham Davis, testified before the House Committee on Un-American Activities that Katharine Lumpkin had been a member of a Communist Party cell that operated within the American Federation of Teachers. Furthermore, Lumpkin's older sister, Grace Lumpkin, named Katharine's partner of thirty years, Dorothy Douglas, as a Communist to the FBI. By 1950s logic, Katharine Lumpkin would seem "guilty by association." Though unsubstantiated, these accusations did irreparable damage to Lumpkin's personal and professional life, resulting in

Pre Lumpkin quoted in Harry Hansen, "A Reconstructed Rebel," *Survey Graphic*, February, 1947.

the loss of relationship with her life-long partner and a publisher's refusal to print her next book.⁸³

Conclusion

In 1917 Walter Rauschenbusch, a leader in the Social Gospel movement observed, "Conversion has usually been conceived as a break with our own sinful past. But in many cases it is also a break with the sinful past of a social group." Their participation in the Social Gospel movement had successfully severed Myra Page and Katharine Lumpkin from their association with the Lost Cause. The degree of social change that seemed possible within that movement, however, had disappointed them both. Lumpkin and Page each left the YWCA convinced that moral uplift provided an insufficient remedy to industrial problems. They now placed their hope in more secular forms of social and political renewal, such as CIO unionism and the theoretical principles of the Communist Party.⁸⁴

Importantly, although she now openly embraced Communism, Myra Page never saw the Christian and Communist chapters of her life as irreconcilable. Following many years of Party involvement, she reflected that "losing her faith" seemed inconsequential, because she

⁸³ Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1998), 60; Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "Katharine du Pre Lumpkin," in *Notable American Women: A Biographical Dictionary Completing the Twentieth Century* Ed. by Susan Ware (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 401; Katharine du Pre Lumpkin Subject File, Federal Bureau of Investigation (obtained by Jacquelyn Dowd Hall through Civil Action Number 96-2306 JR, *Jacquelyn Dowd Hall v. U.S. Department of Justice*; copy in Hall's possession).

⁸⁴ Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: Macmillan, 1917), 99.

“still believed in the ideals and the vision of brotherhood and peace given in the New Testament.” While some might label this attitude “Christian Socialism,” Page never labeled it as such. Instead, she saw the Social Gospel conception that Christians should be “clearly and unconditionally opposed to the selfish use of wealth” as entirely compatible with Marx’s teaching that the ruling class should not be permitted to “subjugate the labor of others.”⁸⁵

Page’s conflation of two ideologies considered by most contemporaries and historians to be fundamentally opposed provides important insight into activists’ understanding of how Christianity and Communism interacted within the Southern Front. Though the southern labor movement’s detractors vociferously claimed that the radical alternatives these women embraced constituted a foreign “religion” that captivated the minds of the working class and held them in its thrall, activists like Page understood these new forms of ideological expression as a more authentic version of their personal Christian belief. Page’s frank admission about the compatibility of her religious convictions with Communist principles during this time means that some activists felt they could maintain a commitment to multiple ideologies and complicates what it meant to be a member of the Popular Front’s radical southern fringe.

As they chipped away at the rigid structure of southern social norms from within the southern Social Gospel movement, the Christians hoped to convert others’ hearts and minds to more egalitarian viewpoints on the subjects of race and class. Instead they experienced a

⁸⁵ Baker, *In a Generous Spirit*, 50-52; Page to Frederickson, Myra Page Papers; A. Clayton Powell, “Jesus and Wealth,” *The Crisis Magazine*, October, 1933; Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (1888; reprint, New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 99.

personal conversion that can best be viewed through the lens of their writing during the Southern Front. This literature will be the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER III: REVELATION

Being a proletarian in good standing is no bed of roses.

-Heywood Broun⁸⁶

In 1931 Myra Page reported for the *New Masses* on a United Mine Workers strike in the coalfields of southwestern Pennsylvania. There she had observed a miner named Slim, who threw down his coat on the picket line and shook his fist over his head, saying “Any man what’ll stand by and see his children starving and do nothing is a low-down--.” Then, pointing toward the sky he cried out, “God above owes us a living!” Finally, holding up a *Daily Worker* Slim proclaimed, “Miners, here, read this, the workingman’s Bible.”⁸⁷

In her article on the strike Page reported, “Slim is typical of the change going on among hundreds of striking miners” a growing number of whom state, “Sure I’m red. Red’s what the bosses don’t like. But it’s good for the miner and working man” and “it’s better to die fighting than starve to death.” Page’s article parallels the reports of other Southern Front commentators who observed coexistence between Christianity and Communism that, while never easy, nonetheless demonstrates the commitment of activists in the radical milieu of the Southern Front. Through their observances and writing, Page and the Lumpkin sisters joined a growing chorus of social commentators who loudly proclaimed that “religion was not about

⁸⁶ Heywood Broun quoted in Irving Bernstein, *The Lean Years: A History of the American Worker 1920-1933* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1960), 316.

⁸⁷ Myra Page, “On the Picket Line,” *The New Masses*, July 1931.

waiting for blessings to occur; it was about crying out against injustice, and challenging people to make their world anew.”⁸⁸

Though working people sometimes experienced easier coexistence between Christianity and Communism, social agitators like the Christianas, who had been involved in the southern Social Gospel movement during the 1920s, had lost faith in the movement’s ability to successfully address the imbalance of power between labor and capital. By the 1930s they felt equally frustrated with its tendency to buttress the racial and gender mores they saw as intricately tied to the immobility of the working class. Even as these limitations continued in the South, alternative radical ideologies such as Communism, inserted themselves into American thought, and many progressive southerners fled Dixie to embrace the heart of the Popular Front in New York.⁸⁹

From that vantage point, a few southern women mounted a literary attack on the very institutions that had driven them from their homeland. This chapter examines their writing as a critique leveled against not only southern society, but also organizations within Popular Front itself. As they continued to grapple with their commitment to social equality, they encountered resistance to their efforts from within the very organizations they imagined

⁸⁸ Page, “On the Picket Line;” *Daily Worker* correspondent, Joseph North, encountered in 1945 a black sharecropper in Birmingham, Alabama who “‘trusts God but keeps his powder dry;’ reads his Bible every night, can quote from the Book of Daniel and the Book of Job...and [studies] the Stalin book on the nation question;” Joseph North, *No Men Are Strangers*, (New York: International Publishers, 1958), 227 cited in Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), xi; Erik S. Gellman and Jarod Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class: Labor’s Southern Prophets in New Deal America* (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 2011), 1.

⁸⁹ Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008), 3, 10.

would right social ills. Racial and class critiques in their writing coalesce within a rich trove of religious allegory that points to the gender conflicts they had observed or experienced. Through their writing, the women in this study provide useful examples through which to view the limitations female activists experienced within the Southern Front. In order that their writing might openly and honestly question the white, male, southern order, the Christianas felt they had to leave their beloved homeland. This chapter will probe how and why they left, and also explore why one decided to return.⁹⁰

Grace Lumpkin

Elder sister to Katharine, Grace Lumpkin inherited the same Lost Cause heritage, but her life followed a remarkably different trajectory. Grace Lumpkin took a quicker turn toward a much more radical form of activism and then returned to the Lost Cause ideology later in life. Lumpkin was born in Milledgeville, Georgia, in 1892. In 1900 the Lumpkin family relocated to Columbia, South Carolina. A year later, when the family began its sojourn in the Sand Hills, Lumpkin was already in junior college at Brenau, in Georgia. From 1919 to 1921, she worked for the YWCA as recreation director for American nurses and French girls in industry in Roanne, France. At the end of her term overseas, Lumpkin returned to the states to pass a relatively quiet four years at the University of South Carolina studying literature and writing. During this time she organized a night school for local farmers and their wives. Lumpkin remained involved with the YWCA, but became

⁹⁰ Gilmore, *Defying Dixie*, 3, 215.

increasingly convinced of the need for unionization after spending summers with North Carolina cotton mill workers. Despite her involvement with the YWCA, or perhaps because of it, Grace Lumpkin lost faith in the power of Christian social reform to heal Southern society more quickly than her younger sister and her “conversion” to more radical alternatives proceeded apace. Rather than engage in the life of an activist, however, Grace Lumpkin decided to write.⁹¹

In 1925 Lumpkin moved to New York City to attend journalism school at Columbia University. There she met and roomed with Esther Shemitz, future wife of the notorious Soviet spy, Whitaker Chambers. Shemitz and Chambers would prove instrumental both in Lumpkin’s conversion to Communism *and* her later disavowal of it. While taking night classes, Lumpkin and Shemitz worked for the Quaker publication, *The World Tomorrow*. Though the Quakers had not “consciously promoted Communism,” the journal presented Lumpkin with her first exposure to Marxist thought. Lumpkin recalled, “working on the principle of tolerance for all they had in their offices members of various races and ideologies; and the Communists being the most articulate I listened to them.”⁹²

Not only did she listen, Lumpkin translated thought into journalistic practice and political action. Co-authoring an article with Shemitz entitled “The Artist in a Hostile Environment” provided Lumpkin’s entrée into the world of the Harlem Renaissance. The

⁹¹ Suzanne Sowinska, “Introduction,” in *To Make My Bread*, (1932; reprint, Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1995), viii-ix; Grace Lumpkin Papers, 6632 Box 1, folder “Contents List”

⁹² Grace Lumpkin, “Memorial Day - 1961,” Katharine Du Pre Lumpkin Papers, The Southern Historical Collection at the Louise Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, Collection Number 04171.

article argued that African American artists should engage with social protest, but not allow themselves to be limited by it. Lumpkin and Shemitz did not remain safely behind the typewriter, however. They placed themselves in harm's way on a number of occasions to support causes they believed in. In addition to walking on the picket line in the Passaic, New Jersey strike of 1926-27, they also went to jail for protesting the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti in 1927. Lumpkin used these personal experiences to reflect upon the injustice visited upon workers in society, and her writing for the Quaker paper quickly gave way to Communist musings in the *New Masses* and *Daily Worker*. By 1928, Lumpkin had officially allied herself with the Communist Party. Though she later claimed to have never "carried a card," the Lumpkin-Shemitz apartment quickly became a gathering place for a Communist cell that included Chambers, as well as Lumpkin's future husband, Michael Intrator.⁹³

Writing the Southern Front

Soon after her marriage, encouraged by her husband and other Communist Party members, Lumpkin began to write feverishly about her native South in prose inspired by her newfound proletarian sensibilities. The 1929 strike at the Loray textile mill in Gastonia, North Carolina, had recently sensationalized the battle between labor organizers and industrialists in the South. The tragic shooting death of the mill workers' strike leader and "balladeer," Ella May Wiggins, had inspired a literary "conversation" between writers

⁹³ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "Women Writers, the 'Southern Front,' and the Dialectical Imagination," *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 69, No. 1 (Feb., 2003), pp. 3-38.

sympathetic to the cause of unionism, and each eagerly proffered his or her own interpretation of the event in novelistic form. In 1932, Grace Lumpkin added her voice to the growing corpus of proletarian strike literature with the publication of her first novel, *To Make My Bread*. The book traces a Carolina family's ill-fated bid to overcome the privations of mountain life by migrating to a piedmont mill town. The mother of Lumpkin's heroine, Bonnie McClure, sacrifices everything she has to the industrial "machine," including food for herself and education for her children. Unable to get ahead, Emma McClure eventually succumbs to despair and begins to think of the mill, which had been an emblem of hope for starving mountain people, as a giant constantly murmuring, "I'll grind your bones to make my bread."⁹⁴

Before their descent from the mountains Lumpkin portrays these future millworkers as a primitive people, living happily on the land, but driven to the mills by capitalist-induced starvation. Though laboring in modern industry, they doggedly cling to mountain culture, until time and disillusionment transform them into incipient proletarians. In this way Lumpkin, along with other authors of Southern Front literature, thought that the vicissitudes of industrial production would inevitably bring about its own destruction, by convincing workers to rebel against the injustices of capitalism and become zealous union recruits or foot soldiers in a proletarian revolution.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ John A. Salmond, *Gastonia, 1929: The Story of the Loray Mill Strike* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 188-89; Lumpkin, *To Make My Bread*, 219.

⁹⁵ Richard Gray, *Southern Aberrations: Writers of the American South and the Problems of Regionalism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 318; Robert H. Zieger, "From Primordial Folk to Redundant Workers: Southern Textile Workers and Social

The explicit message of *To Make My Bread* indicates that Lumpkin views Christianity in opposition to the Communist movement, yet her incipient proletarians demonstrate a curious tendency to understand their interactions with the industrial machine in biblical terms. Although the analogy of the folklore giant forms the central metaphor for Lumpkin's critique of capitalism, *To Make My Bread* also presents religion as a foil to the interests of the southern working class. The novel explicates the Party's lack of progress in the South with detailed accounts of antiquated forms of religious worship that Lumpkin believed hindered organizing efforts. For example, Lumpkin describes the religious customs of mountain people before their descent to the mill village as a type of frenzy that could only be abated by the baptism of white-clad children in a cold mountain stream. After their descent, the weaving room's clamor reminds workers of "the sound of sinners' teeth grinding in hell."⁹⁶

Yet Lumpkin also complicates her analysis of southern religion by implying that labor activists could harness southern workers' religious sensibilities to positive effect. The novel suggests that southern workers, upon encountering the capitalist machine, could translate antiquated religious principles into meaningful labor activism. Seeing that mill churches languishing under the control of mill owners had failed to provide the mechanisms for cathartic release found in mountain religion, Lumpkin reasoned that mill workers would learn to channel their unaddressed emotional turmoil into unionism. To that end, Lumpkin's

Observers, 1920-1990," in *Southern Labor in Transition: 1940-1995*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), 273-74.

⁹⁶ Lumpkin, *To Make My Bread*, 61-64, 219; Grace Lumpkin, "Testimony Before the Senate Subcommittee on Government Operations," 83rd Congress, April 2, 1953.

protagonist, Bonnie, a representation of the Loray Mill strike's Ella May Wiggins, transformed religious songs about the sacrifice of Jesus into ballads depicting the sacrifice of workers to the interest of capital. Bonnie's folksongs served as a call to collective, revolutionary action for workers, just as her activism formed a conduit to channel her former religious frenzy into the workers' movement.⁹⁷

Although *To Make My Bread* fulfilled, on the surface, Party requirements for proletarian literature, *New Masses* reviewer, A. B. Magil, criticized the book for failing to articulate a meaningful course of action that would rectify the workers' dilemma. "While the book is profoundly true to the author's experience," Magil lamented,

it contains little political evaluation of that experience. Here we touch on a fundamental defect: the author has written for the most part not from her present point of view as a revolutionist, but from the point of view of the backward workers she is describing. And the point of view of backward workers is, of course, a reflection of the ideology of the ruling class.

In his use of the term "backward worker," Magil reveals the Party's inability to comprehend the cultural perspective of the workers it purported to represent. What is interesting about Magil's critique is that what makes the book "weak" from a propaganda perspective is also the very thing that produces insight into Lumpkin's motivations. Indeed, the metaphorical language and biblical imagery in *To Make My Bread* illustrates Lumpkin's personal struggle to come to terms with the competing value systems of religion and Communism in the world of Southern labor. Literary scholars have noted that "there was a telling link between what the author of *To Make My Bread* was doing and what she was

⁹⁷ Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 107; Lumpkin, *To Make My Bread*, 345-46; Gray, *Southern Aberrations*, 313-18.

dramatizing.” In the novel, Lumpkin’s characters battle to reconcile mountain tradition with life in the mills while, in her writing, Lumpkin struggled to reconcile “inherited literary forms” and social practices with her own radical agenda.⁹⁸

By contrast, Myra Page’s 1932 novel about the 1929 Gastonia strike was considered “so ideologically ‘correct’ that it was almost wholly ignored by reviewers to the right of the *New Masses*.” She remembered, “I called my novel *Gathering Storm: A Story of the Black Belt*, because I thought the socialist storm would continue to grow. Whites and blacks seemed to be getting together, and I foresaw a new world.” In the novel, Page crafts an indictment of southern industry through a comparison of the struggles faced by two families of industrial workers, one white and one black. Page advances her readers’ understanding along a continuum from antipathy toward blacks, represented by mountain denizens who descend to work in the mills, to their offspring who swiftly progress toward an ideal of interracial solidarity through their interaction with blacks in industry. While contemplating the idea of imminent revolutionary upheaval, Page’s protagonist, Marge, feels herself “riding the gale! Not swept along, but deliberately, joyously a fore-runner, a marshaller of the gathering storm.”⁹⁹

⁹⁸ A.B. Magil, Review of *To Make My Bread*, *New Masses* (New York), Feb. 1933; Gray, *Southern Aberrations*, 313-18.

⁹⁹ Sylvia Cook quoted in Janet E. Lane, “The Silenced Cry from the Factory Floor: Gastonia’s Female Strikers and their Proletarian Authors” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University of Pennsylvania, 2004), 180; Suzanne Sowinska, “Writing Across the Color Line: White Women Writers and the ‘Negro Question’ in the Gastonia Novels” in *Radical Revisions: Rereading 1930s Culture* Ed. by Bill Mullen and Sherry Lee Linkon (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 125; Baker, *In a Generous Spirit*, 115; Myra Page, *Gathering Storm: A Story of the Black Belt* (New York: International Publishers, 1932), 374.

Page's analysis of the Gastonia strike is both literally and figuratively more "black and white" than Lumpkin's. Page oversimplifies the racial bias and emotional depth of her characters, both black and white, portraying all as equally relieved to join the union and immediately forsake racism. Page also simplifies workers' religious impulses in a manner that Lumpkin successfully complicates. By distilling mill workers' activism into a secularized version of their former religion, Page makes it clear that she views the subject in a much more one-dimensional manner. Her main character, Marge, worries as a young child that she does not have faith because she is wicked, having never been converted away from "original sin." Page writes that "Marge had no way of knowing that hundreds of others in their early teens...struggle to square the world of realities around them with the ideas given them in religion." After she has chosen the course of "reality" and union leadership, Marge rewrites the Twenty Third Psalm:

Corey mill is my shepherd and I shall not want
He maketh me to lie down on park benches,
He leadeth me beside the free soup houses,
He restoreth my doubt in the textile industry.
He leadeth me in the paths of destruction for his company's sake.
Yea, tho I walk thru the valley of starvation to uphold the union, I do fear evil.
For they are against me.
For their policy and their profits do fight me.
They prepare to reduce my wages in the presence of my enemies.
They anoint my wages with reductions.
My expenses runneth over my income.
Surely poverty and starvation will follow me all the days of my life.
And I will dwell in a rented house forever.
P.S.—That is, if I don't stand by the Union and fight like hell!

In this way, Page makes a mockery of her protagonist's religious belief, presenting her with a clear choice: either cling to religion and abandon rational thought, or forsake religious belief altogether.¹⁰⁰

Though *Gathering Storm* more uniformly followed Communist expectations for radical proletarian fiction than did *To Make My Bread*, Lumpkin's second attempt, *A Sign for Cain*, corrected this "deficiency." Published in 1935, the book describes the conversion of a young, black working-class girl, named Selah, into a Communist organizer. Lumpkin's narrative compares Selah's struggles with those of a young southern white woman who agitates for the rights of workers. In comparison with Page, however, Lumpkin does not "sentimentalize" her characters. She depicts Selah as "strong-willed, clearheaded, and intelligent in a way that anticipates contemporary narrative representations of African American women." In fact, "of all the novels written by [white] women about the Negro question, *A Sign for Cain* is the only one to attempt to portray the lives and experiences of the black working class in realistic detail."¹⁰¹

The book prompted Raleigh *News and Observer* editor, Jonathan Daniels to remark wryly, "Miss Lumpkin has written a lively piece of propaganda. Certainly if all of those who wrote for the revolution had her skill the reds and the whites in America would already be fighting in the streets." Despite *A Sign for Cain's* fulfillment of Communist Party objectives, during its writing Lumpkin felt bullied by male Party members. During the McCarthy era she testified before the Senate Subcommittee on Government Operations about an incident that

¹⁰⁰ Sowinska, "Writing Across the Color Line," 127; Page, *Gathering Storm*, 47-48, 332.

¹⁰¹ Sowinska, "Writing Across the Color Line," 133-35.

occurred while working with a comrade to organize African American sharecroppers in Alabama:

There had been some trouble...and a deputy sheriff was patrolling the road outside of the home of these Negroes. I believed in helping the Negro race. I believe in helping them to help themselves, because they are God's children, as important as I am. That is what I believe now. But the Communist organizer ordered me to go out and slap the deputy sheriff in the face. He said as a result of that I would be arrested. As a way of trying to get me to do that, he said, "your picture will appear in newspapers all over the country, and you will sell a lot more of your books."

Lumpkin's refusal to commit this breach of etiquette prompted *New Masses* editor, Joshua Kunitz, to call her into his office upon her return to New York. Lumpkin testified that Kunitz told her in no uncertain terms, "We have people in strategic positions on magazines, on papers, who will write reviews of our books," and "if this novel has anything against the party line in it...we will break you as a writer." In this manner male Party leadership made it clear to Lumpkin that her writing operated at their discretion, and not her own.¹⁰²

Not only did Lumpkin encounter opposition from men inside the Party, thanks to an ill-fated 1936 interview with the right-wing editor of the *American Review*, she also became ensnared in an ideological debate with a group of conservative male writers. In their interview, Seward Collins had confessed an affinity for the dictators Hitler and Mussolini. He stated that, as demonstrated by "trouble-making" European Jews, African Americans must

¹⁰² Jonathan Daniels, "Old Devil Cotton," Review of *A Sign for Cain*, by Grace Lumpkin, *Saturday Review of Literature*, November 9, 1935; Grace Lumpkin, "Testimony Before the Senate Subcommittee on Government Operations," 83rd Congress, April 2, 1953.

also be “segregated.” Collins further implied that the southern Agrarian writers who used his magazine to publicize their views shared his fascist sympathies. Lumpkin’s report of her interview with Collins scathingly suggested that the Agrarians, using the *American Review* as a mouthpiece, had supplied the “theoretical foundation of a reactionary movement” in the South. Embarrassed by the implication, and by the affiliation with Collins, Agrarian Allen Tate called Lumpkin to account. When she pointed out Collins had made the association himself, Collins vehemently denied the assertion. In her own defense, Lumpkin pointed to certain essays in the Agrarians aggregate work, *I’ll Take My Stand*, which supported the connection Collins implied.¹⁰³

The Agrarians emerged unscathed from their unfortunate association with Collins, but Lumpkin’s reputation as a writer sustained permanent damage. Northern literary attacks portraying the South as a “benighted” region, and its literature second-rate had convinced Allen Tate of the importance of controlling the region’s narrative. Therefore, in assembling their corpus of “southern literature” over the next few decades, the conservative agrarian “boys club” systematically marginalized Lumpkin’s work, along with most other proletarian fiction written by female authors, relegating them to a subgenre of “protest writing.” Tate defended such attacks in a letter to fellow-Agrarian John Peale Bishop, saying that “one of the faults of the liberals and Communists...is that their art has not gone beyond the most naïve propaganda.” In response to Tate’s call to action, fellow Agrarians such as Donald Davidson decried books like *To Make My Bread*, because he thought the condition of poor

¹⁰³ Hall, “Women Writers,” 25-27.

white southerners revealed an aspect of the South that was “not quite healthy” and that authors of such literature had turned away from “southern life in its broader aspects.”¹⁰⁴

The “Fiction” of Popular Front Feminism

At this juncture, persistent conflict characterized Grace Lumpkin’s literary career. Her clash with the Agrarians may be seen as somewhat predictable, given the stark differences in their fundamental philosophy about race and other social issues important in the South. Lumpkin did not expect, however, to feel abandoned by the Communist Party, with its professed dedication to gender, as well as racial, equality. But her writing expressed continued disappointment in the opportunities available to women within the Southern Front.

Though publication of *A Sign for Cain* was immediately successful in the eyes of Party hardliners, Lumpkin’s personal life began to founder. Her marriage to Michael Intrator fell upon rocky shoals when the couple decided to end Lumpkin’s pregnancy. Almost presciently, Lumpkin had written about the ravages childbirth exacted upon women in *To Make My Bread*, where she represented children as responsible for the “scarcity and the sufferings of women.” The novel depicts a mill woman’s experience of childbirth as a “pig slaughtering.” Instead of portraying children as bringing new life, Lumpkin implies that they both destroy their mothers and feed the industrial machine. Lumpkin’s character Emma

¹⁰⁴Gray, *Southern Aberrations*, 96, 106, 108, Allen Tate to John Peale Bishop, April 7, 1933, quoted in Gray, *Southern Aberrations*, 153; Donald Davidson quoted in Gray, *Southern Aberrations*, 161-62; *The History of Southern Literature*, Ed. by Louis D. Rubin, Jr. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985).

McClure accepts women's conditions, displaying her resignation to both the new industrial order and the age-old paternalism.¹⁰⁵

Myra Page also addressed the topic of ritualized female slaughter in paternalistic societies, but from a different angle. *Gathering Storm* contains a vivid description of the brutal rape and murder of an African American activist, Martha, by the son of the white family for whom she works. When he discovers Martha's body, her lover, Jim, attacks the man who raped and killed her, then turns his gun upon himself to escape lynching. Page utilizes rape in her narrative as a vehicle through which to expand her analysis of southern social problems beyond her critique of class conflict. White anti-lynching reformers often sought to assuage middle-class guilt by portraying these executions as a pathologic response of poor whites to black economic competition. Page's novel critiques this myth by connecting the politics of rape to white supremacy. Martha's story explores how racial and gender differences are inscribed upon the bodies of working-class black women, while Jim's willingness to take his own life to avoid the lynch mob, restores agency to African Americans.¹⁰⁶

In their writing and their activism, the Christianas never hesitated to agitate for the disfranchised. When it came time to advocate on behalf of white women, however, they expressed some reluctance. When Page was in college in Richmond, she recalled that she and the other college women had "listened to this woman suffragette, but we didn't do a thing.

¹⁰⁵ Gray, *Southern Aberrations*, 315; Lumpkin, *To Make My Bread*, 49, 55, 61.

¹⁰⁶ Page, *Gathering Storm*, 122-25, 130-34; Paula Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 90; Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry*, 207-08.

We were polite to the speaker. We listened. But she went, and we never did a thing. We didn't form a chapter, we didn't raise a dollar, which is disgraceful, but that was the way it was. It just wasn't what 'nice' southern girls did."¹⁰⁷

Though reluctant to advocate openly on their own behalf, writing provided a means through which genteel southern women could argue, from a safe distance, against the social maladies they witnessed and lived. Unlike labor organizing or suffrage, writing was a private action until published and then, as Myra Page proved when she assumed her nom de plume, it was relatively easy to divorce oneself from the repercussions of unpopular opinions. More importantly for the authors themselves, writing provided a means by which southern women could symbolically distance themselves from the South. "I didn't begin to write about the South until I got away from it," Page recalled. "It hurt so, and I was confused and mad." Moreover, because it was commonly understood in the South at the time that Communists lost everything important to them, and often went to prison, for opposing the Southern status quo, this "distancing" also took on a literal dimension for many radical southern writers.¹⁰⁸

Grace Lumpkin accomplished her "distancing" by way of physical remove, writing her third novel, *The Wedding*, while still living in New York City. Though she had been away from the South nearly fifteen years by its publication, the novel deals with southern

¹⁰⁷ Myra Page Interview with Mary Frederickson, July 12, 1975, G-0042, in the Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (hereafter referred to as "Page, Interview, 1975").

¹⁰⁸ Quoted in Christina Looper Baker, *In a Generous Spirit: A First-Person Biography of Myra Page* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 110; Glenda Gilmore has theorized "Those who openly protested white domination had to leave, one way or another." Gilmore, *Defying Dixie*, 3.

themes in a way that illustrates the tensions experienced by radical women during the Popular Front. *The Wedding* has been mistaken for a southern “comedy of manners” in the style of Jane Austen. Upon closer examination, however, it becomes clear that the book’s female characters struggle to understand how middle-class privilege intersects with sexual oppression to undermine women’s capacity for revolutionary change.¹⁰⁹

The story takes place in the twenty-four hours immediately preceding the wedding of the eldest daughter of a genteel post-bellum family fallen upon hard times. Jennie Middleton is aware of the predicament imposed upon her by her family’s financial troubles: her father requires her marriage in order to rescue the family from pecuniary woe. By contrast, Jennie’s younger sister, Susan, has not yet come of age. Unaware of the woman’s burden her sister carries, Susan instead becomes closely attuned to crimes committed against the working class, especially those with racial connotations. She witnesses her brother’s theft of a silver punch bowl to “hide it from the Yankees,” in a child’s imitation of a Civil-War drama. When the “theft” is blamed on a black servant, Susan reflects upon the injustice of white society and secretly plots schemes of revenge that carry serious revolutionary import.¹¹⁰

Southern literature experts have argued *The Wedding* exemplifies a work of women’s “dystopian radical fiction” because Lumpkin presents her audience with two halves of a radical female intellectual character but refuses to unite them by novel’s end. Though Jennie Middleton is keenly aware of gender repression in her own life, she seems quite unconscious

¹⁰⁹ Grace Lumpkin, *The Wedding* (1939; reprint, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976); Jessica Kimball Printz, “Tracing the Fault Lines of the Radical Female Subject,” in *Radical Revisions: Rereading 1930s Culture* Ed. by Bill Mullen and Sherry Lee Linkon (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 168-69.

¹¹⁰ Printz, “Tracing the Fault Lines of the Radical Female Subject,” 176-77.

of the structural use of marriage as an instrument for the maintenance of patriarchy. She also remains completely unaware of the benefits that accrue to her as a result of her class and race position. By contrast, Susan has the benefit of a child's perspective that grants her an unusual amount of access to the thoughts and feelings of the working class, yet she does not understand the "burden of southern womanhood" that plagues her older sister. Ultimately, even Susan fails to understand the emotional suffering she feels on behalf of her social inferiors within its broader collective context. Thus, the sisters' constricted perspectives limit the scope of their radical consciousness, rendering each character unable to effect meaningful change within dominant configurations of southern power.¹¹¹

A reviewer commented that Lumpkin's third novel was "as far from the subject of her first book as a picket line is from a pulpit," but that remark reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of its author's intentions. *The Wedding* does indeed muddle neat prescriptions that conceive of radical literature exclusively as a genre of working class fiction. Lumpkin's use of profoundly gendered themes in a story of privileged white women white women, however, successfully complicates assumptions about the character of proletarian fiction by expanding ideas about who exactly is affected by the structures of southern oppression. In the final analysis, the author's bifurcation of a single radical consciousness between the characters of Jennie and Susan Middleton not only centers the book firmly within the genre of revolutionary fiction, it also places Lumpkin somewhat ahead of her time as herald of a feminist transformation still many years in the offing.

¹¹¹ Printz, "Tracing the Fault Lines of the Radical Female Subject," 178-180.

More importantly for this analysis, however, *The Wedding*'s examination of the structural inequities afflicting middle-class white southern women offers important clues as to what was happening in Lumpkin's personal life. Writing shortly after her entanglement with the Communist Party over *A Sign for Cain* and her highly publicized conflict with the Agrarians, it seems likely that Lumpkin wrote this unconventional novel as a self-conscious exploration of her own potential as a radical and a woman within the Southern Front. Literary experts have argued that *The Wedding*, more than any of her other books, closely follows Lumpkin's own story, revealing its author as a "radical intellectual woman embroiled in a very personal crisis of commitment." Some aspects of the novel do seem to foreshadow events in Lumpkin's own life. For example, by the end of the novel, Susan has "retreat[ed] into the language and images of religious allegory to make sense of the terrible injustice that has been committed and allowed to stand." In this way, the book reveals Lumpkin's increasing cynicism about her own ability to facilitate radical social change."¹¹²

Re-writing the Southern Front

If Grace Lumpkin used her last radical novel as a means to assess her own viability within the Southern Front, it is clear that she now felt the limitations imposed on her from various directions. During the 1920s, Lumpkin had tried to sort out the meaning of her beliefs about social equality. In the 1930s, she had closely identified with the interests of the

¹¹² "Bride's Strike," Review of *The Wedding*, by Grace Lumpkin, *Time*, February 27, 1939, 79; Printz, "Tracing the Fault Lines of the Radical Female Subject," 181-83; Lumpkin, "A Postscript," Grace Lumpkin Papers.

working class and “developed a natural acceptance of people of all races” and had experimented with different methods of translating that belief into action, and her best efforts appear in literary form. In the 1940s, however, Lumpkin seemed intent upon translating whatever remained of her “belief” in social equality into inaction. Rather than continue to swear allegiance to a Communist Party that had disappointed her, in 1941, following the advice of her close friend and confidant Whitaker Chambers, Lumpkin formally disavowed the Party and “returned to God.”¹¹³

Over the next decade, Lumpkin worked with Calvary Episcopal Church in New York City and lectured on the evils of Communism in churches from Maine to New Jersey. In 1952 she physically returned to the South with a move to King and Queen, Virginia. The following year Lumpkin testified before the Senate Subcommittee on Investigations about the supposed impropriety of *A Sign For Cain*'s use in State Department training programs. During this time, Lumpkin named her sister, Katharine, as a Communist to the FBI, destroying her sister's personal and professional life in the process. For further clues as to the cause of such a marked change in direction we will turn, once again, to Lumpkin's writing.

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The year 1962 saw the publication of Lumpkin's final novel, *Full Circle*. The story included a detailed and, one could argue semi-autobiographical, reflection of a young

¹¹³ Grace Lumpkin wrote “It was Whit who urged me to return to my family, and country - and to God;” Grace Lumpkin to Kenneth Toombs, Jan 14, 1972, Grace Lumpkin Papers.

¹¹⁴ Grace Lumpkin Papers; Katharine Du Pre Lumpkin Subject File, Federal Bureau of Investigation (obtained through Civil Action Number 96-2306 JR, *Jacquelyn Dowd Hall v. U.S. Department of Justice*; copy in Hall's possession; Grace Lumpkin, “Testimony Before the Senate Subcommittee on Government Operations,” 83rd Congress, April 2, 1953.

woman's rejection of Communism and subsequent return to Christianity. Loosely following the infamous Scottsboro trial, the book tells the story of a young southern woman named Arnie, who meets two young Communist attorneys newly arrived in the South to defend a black man accused of rape. Arnie is immediately attracted to the men because of their tremendous passion for justice and exacting moral standards. Both men, however, "ridiculed all southern customs and Arnie sensitively responded to their ridicule by becoming ashamed of her former life." One of these young men, when invited to dinner at Arnie's home, threw the mint out of his tea onto the floor in disgust, saying "I don't want even to taste the foul stuff the Lords of the Lash use in their juleps." Arnie is attracted to them because of their urbane demeanor and intellectual wit, but they insult her upbringing as racist and provincial and ultimately break her spirit. In this manner, Lumpkin fictionalizes the tale of her own life by relating the story of a woman who is reduced to a living death by Communism and is restored to life by the Gospel message.¹¹⁵

With the book's publication Grace Lumpkin found that she had come "full circle" in her own life. Despite her 1930s feud with his colleague over *To Make My Bread*, and his own stinging insinuations about her ability to write as a southerner during the Collins fiasco, Vanderbilt English professor and agrarian philosopher, Donald Davidson, now wrote to Lumpkin in unreserved praise of her narrative:

I have read your novel, and found myself deeply moved by it. It seems to me a profoundly important book. Among the books of so-called "revelation" that I have read, I know of nothing like it -- either in fiction or non-fiction. The only thing comparable is Chambers' *Witness* -- but Chambers' experience does not

¹¹⁵ Grace Lumpkin, *Full Circle* (Boston: Western Islands Publishers, 1962), 24-25, 269-72.

clearly intersect with the sphere of American life that I know, especially the North-South complex, while your novel does; it touches “home.”¹¹⁶

In the final analysis it is difficult to know how much of Grace Lumpkin’s reversion to southern religion to attribute to disillusionment with Communist ideology. In each phase of her life Lumpkin embraced systems of belief that required zealous adherence to a set of principles meant to right some form of injustice. Rather than representing two ends of a spectrum, for Grace Lumpkin, and possibly for her sisters in the Southern Front, Christianity and Communism at different times represented a possibility for change, both social and personal, that each Christiana hoped would come.

¹¹⁶ Donald Davidson to Grace Lumpkin, 1962, Grace Lumpkin Papers.

EPILOGUE

What people are seeking is not so much the home they left behind as a place that they feel they can change, a place in which their lives and strivings will make a difference—a place in which to *create* a home.

-Carol Stack, *Call to Home*¹¹⁷

While Grace Lumpkin experienced her “return to God,” Whittaker Chambers stopped running from the Communist Party and went to work for *Time*. Upon learning Lumpkin had returned to New York City Chambers wrote, “I’m shocked to find you back in this Gomorrah...the atmosphere here is impregnated with poisons, moral and spiritual. It isn’t a safe place for an old, old man, let alone a young woman. ...You are being reborn, why try to crawl back into the womb, especially when the womb is corrupt?”¹¹⁸

Chambers and Shemitz were by this time living on a farm outside the city and Chambers implored Lumpkin to visit. “We’ve moved into the bigger house [and] our happiness in having you there would be very great.” “We need farm help,” Chambers quipped, “of course we exploit our labor and I have a sharecropper too. Cotched him one night on a dark road.” Thus, rather tragically, Grace Lumpkin, who had once physically and metaphorically, through her writing, placed herself in harm’s way to defend the economic interest of African Americans, now found herself the recipient of jokes made at their expense.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Carol Stack, *Call to Home: African Americans Reclaim the Rural South* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 199.

¹¹⁸ Whittaker Chambers to Grace Lumpkin, July 24, 1941, Grace Lumpkin papers.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

In her 1941 relationship with Chambers, Grace Lumpkin appears little more than a passive recipient of conservative “advice.” By 1953, when her collusion with the FBI led her to name Katharine’s partner of thirty years, Dorothy Douglas, as a Communist, Grace Lumpkin seems to have overcome her reluctance to speak out against her former way of life. On Memorial Day, 1961, Grace Lumpkin wrote an unpublished essay that unabashedly clarified her stance on the Lost Cause ideology she had so vehemently rejected in the 1930s. In it, she reflected upon the “injustices” perpetrated against the South since Reconstruction, insisting with the fervor of a Daughter of the Confederacy that “it was not slavery but freedom the South had fought about.” Lumpkin further stated that the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka Kansas* decision was yet another instance of a northern attempt to “superimpose one race upon another in that occupied country.” Lumpkin attempted to justify her remarkable change of heart by recalling her “natural acceptance of people of all races” during the Communist years. “Even when I left Communism and became a member of a church again,” she recalled, “the church to which I returned welcomed Negroes.” Then, in an elaborately constructed rationale, Lumpkin compared Court-mandated de-segregation to Nazism, theorizing “if the Supreme Court was so powerful it could abolish God from our schools and force de-segregation upon us, another Supreme Court...could put Negroes back into slavery.” Remarkably Lumpkin, much like her plantation-owning ancestors, held “northern aggression,” not racism, responsible for her changed attitude.¹²⁰

When Jacquelyn Dowd Hall interviewed Grace Lumpkin for the Southern Oral History Program in 1974, she found Lumpkin living in a “ramshackle farmhouse” near King

¹²⁰ Grace Lumpkin, “Memorial Day 1961,” Katharine Lumpkin Papers.

and Queen Courthouse, Virginia. Hall noted the abode was characterized by peeling paint, “an atmosphere of mildew and must,” and dominated by a shrine to Lumpkin’s ancestor, Jacob Lumpkin, who had settled the area in the early eighteenth century. By contrast, Katharine Lumpkin in the 1970s lived with her companion, Elizabeth Bennett, in a cozy home in the bustling college town of Charlottesville, Virginia. Indeed, as they increased in age the differences between the Lumpkin sisters became even more pronounced, with Katharine Lumpkin reflecting, “I certainly little dreamed when, in the 1940s, I was writing my account in *The Making of a Southerner* of my growing up in the segregated South, that the system of segregation, seemingly so entrenched, within a few years would be discredited and illegal.”¹²¹

As for Myra Page, though their connection had dissipated over the years, sources reveal that Page and the Lumpkin family were once intimately linked. Katharine Lumpkin’s oldest sister, Elizabeth, life-long patron of the Lost Cause, had, upon her death, gifted a significant amount of money to her youngest sister, Katharine. Accompanying this bequest were Elizabeth Lumpkin’s instructions that, upon Katharine Lumpkin’s death, the funds would be administered by Myra Page and directed toward the “social causes” of her choosing.¹²²

¹²¹ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “Open Secrets: Memory, Imagination, and the Refashioning of Southern Identity,” *American Quarterly* 50 No. 1 (March 1998): 117-121; Katharine du Pre Lumpkin Lecture notes from Wells College, Aurora, New York, 1957-67, Katharine du Pre Lumpkin Papers, University of North Carolina Wilson Library, Chapel Hill.

¹²² Katharine Du Pre Lumpkin to John Lumpkin and Paul Lumpkin, February 26, 1986, Grace Lumpkin Papers.

After moving to her new home in Yonkers, New York, Myra Page continued to speak her mind about social injustice. In 1983, at the age of eighty-two, Page marked the anniversary of the Hiroshima bombing by marching in a demonstration against nuclear proliferation. Over the course of sixteen years oral historians conducted five interviews with Page. These conversations highlight the fact that Page had enjoyed a lifetime of meaningful relationships with her husband and four children, as well as a commitment to social justice that never flagged. When asked by her biographer how she would most like to be remembered she responded, as “a good mother and wife...and as somebody who did what she could, in a generous spirit, like so many others did.”¹²³

This study has traced the ways three social activists followed their own progression: sometimes forward, sometimes back, but always in pursuit of their own unique view of social justice. Myra Page and Katharine Lumpkin in their later years surrounded themselves with a web of supportive relationships and reinforced those connections with continued commitment to fighting for social reform. While they thus, literally and metaphorically, “created a home” for themselves, Grace Lumpkin’s return to the South “deepened her isolation” and permanently separated her from the social activism of her youth. The principal finding of this study has been that southern women activists’ individualized interpretations of the Christian gospel message shaped their rebellion against social inequality and sustained their literary contributions to the Southern Front. Though the Christianas’ paths converge for

¹²³ Mary Frederickson, “Myra Page: Daughter of the South, Worker for Change,” *Southern Changes* 5 No. 1 (1983): 10; Christina Looper Baker, *In a Generous Spirit: A First-Person Biography of Myra Page* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), xxii-xxiii.

only a short time, it was a remarkable time when each challenged the prevailing social structure of the South on behalf of women, African Americans and workers.¹²⁴

¹²⁴ Charles Payne argues that slaves and early civil rights movement activists took a “theology of accommodation” and fashioned from it “a theology of liberation;” Charles M. Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 257; Grace Lumpkin Papers; Hall, “Open Secrets,” 118.

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