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Recommended Citation

Smith, Judith E., "Literary Radicals in Radio's Public Sphere" (2016). *American Studies Faculty Publication Series*. 7.

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A slightly shorter version of this essay will appear in American Literature in Transition, 1940-1950 ed. Christopher Vials (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming)

Literary Radicals in Radio's Public Sphere

Judith E. Smith
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Radio was THE emerging medium in the middle decades of the twentieth century, and radio historians have helped us understand some of the myriad ways it influenced the public sphere and created new forms of cultural consciousness and multivocal formulations of national community. Michele Hilmes has argued that radio was “significantly different from any preceding or subsequent medium in its ability to transcend spatial boundaries, blur the private and public spheres, and escape visual determinations while still retaining the strong element of ‘realism’ that sound—rather than written words--supplies.” Jason Loviglio has analyzed the techniques and implications of radio's creation of an “intimate public.”¹ Radio's social impact came both from its rapid diffusion into the nation's households and neighborhood gathering places, and from the simultaneity of experience produced by listening to particular programs broadcast at set times. In contrast with most other countries where broadcasting's national function justified centralized state

¹ Susan Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination* (NY: Time Life, 1999) Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), xvi; Loviglio, *Radio's Intimate Public: Network Broadcasting and Mass-Mediated Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005)

control, U.S. radio developed through private ownership, with the result that consumer choice among commercial options dominated the definition of “public interest.” Despite regulatory norms, radio’s promise of immediacy and projection of intimacy made it difficult in practice to fully police the boundaries between commercial, entertainment, and political content. ²

This essay will explore the pathways by which some 1930s and 1940s left-wing writers gravitated to radio, and helped to expand the form, content, and the political possibilities of radio’s public sphere, beyond the constraints of its conventional commercial formulas and supposed prohibition on political messages. Especially after 1935, flourishing theatrical innovation and burgeoning social protest movements encouraged literary radicals to expand their imagination of the political and to experiment with new forms of representation.

Radio had a lot to offer. For those writers who could gain access, it conferred a kind of public legitimacy, expanding the literary marketplace, opportunities for prized national exposure, and the possibility to speak to a broad popular audience. Public debate and opposition to the Communications Act of 1934 created pressure on the networks to expand their non-commercial, unsponsored public service programs. These provided openings for formal experimentation with sound and narrative that was particularly well suited to the blurring of high-low boundaries that were a hallmark of left cultural expression, and of literary modernism. In the

²Hilmes, *Radio Voices*, 1-15; Susan Smulyan, *Selling Radio: the Commercialization of American Broadcasting, 1922-1934* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992); Robert McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy: the Battle for the Control of U.S. Broadcasting, 1928-1935* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1993)

late 1930s left-leaning writers appropriated space within radio's offerings to warn listeners of the ominous threat of European fascism and to encourage them to envision a robust social democracy reining in the power of the plutocrats and the white supremacists. After Pearl Harbor, writers and producers with these concerns had much greater social and political authority to broadcast "fighting words" as part of the mobilization for the war effort.³ This expanded authority did not extend into peacetime.

Radio's radicals worked in multiple genres, and they familiarized and legitimated several distinctive forms of social address, nurtured by cultural ferment manifest in various forms and combinations of poetry, theatrical, and musical performance. Although some artists and intellectuals expressed disdain for radio, other modernist writers were drawn to its aural possibilities. For example, when Gertrude Stein returned to the US in 1934, following the enthusiastic reception of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), and the triumphant production of her improbable Black-cast opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* earlier in 1934, she

³ Michael Denning identified radio as a particularly fertile ground for radical writers in the 1930s in *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997), 91. See also my essay, "Radio's 'Cultural Front,' 1938-1948," in *Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio* ed. Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio (New York: Routledge, 2002), 209-230, and *Visions of Belonging: Family Stories, Popular Culture, and Postwar Democracy, 1940-1960* (New York; Columbia University press, 2004), 1-37. *Fighting Words* (1940) was the title of Donald Ogden Stewart's highly edited version of the proceedings of the Third Congress of the left-affiliated League of American Writers, which included a chapter on radio. On wartime radio more generally, see Gerd Horten, *Radio Goes to War: the Cultural Politics of Propaganda During WWII* (Berkeley: University of California, 2002); Howard Blue, *Words at War: WWII Era Radio Drama and the Postwar Broadcasting Industry Blacklist* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2002); Albert Wertheim, *Staging the War: American Drama and WWII* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 174-224.

delightedly listened to the radio and addressed radio's national audience via a lengthy interview with an NBC reporter. She recognized broadcasting's creation of a form of public conversation through multiple kinds of talk as akin to her own work: "In writing *The Making of Americans* I said I write for myself and strangers and this is what broadcasting is."⁴

This essay will map the routes which some literary radicals travelled to explore radio's capabilities, expanding already existing intersections between various culture industries. When poems and plays by 1920s literary moderns Archibald MacLeish, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Dorothy Parker appeared on radio, these writers, all well established in the period before national networks, contributed considerable cultural capital to broadcasting. Their collective contributions shaped radio's public sphere while making the most of radio's aural capacities to intertwine creative work with political concerns for popular audiences. 1930s radicals Orson Welles and Norman Corwin, coming of age at the same time as radio, were radio insiders, writers, producers, and in Welles' case, performer. Their broadcast work in this period created some of the powerful aesthetic techniques most directly associated with radio's anti-fascist address. Many of these writers and producers identified racism, anti-Semitism, and exclusionary nationalism as among the dangers of fascism, and argued for the necessity to challenge national practices

⁴ Stein's interview was broadcast on November 12, 1934 and was published in *Paris Review* 116 (Fall, 1990), 85-97; Sarah Wilson, "Gertrude Stein and the Radio," *Modernism/Modernity*, 11:2 (April 2004), 261-278, quoting Stein in "I Came and Here I Am," *Cosmopolitan*, February 1936. A concert oratorio version of *Four Saints in Three Acts* was broadcast on CBS radio in 1942 and again in 1947. See also Steven Watson, *Prepare for Saints: Gertrude Stein, Virgil Thomson, and the Mainstreaming of American Modernism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

of racial discrimination, in principle and as a valuable strategy. The literary radicals whose names were associated with radio are among the modernist artists influenced by African-American oral, musical, and literary culture, and some of them consciously promoted Black artists and publicly critiqued segregationist and exclusionary practices.⁵

However, a well-established Black radical writer like Langston Hughes confronted serious obstacles in gaining access to national networks, and could not readily benefit from radio's literary marketplace by being paid for written work. The broadcast industry's own deeply ingrained racially segregated practices created powerful limits on radio's public sphere, structuring a firewall that was rarely breached. In the reshaped political environment and radio economics of the late 1940s, the association of these literary radicals with anti-fascist and anti-racist causes provided evidence for formal and informal censorship that effectively closed off their experimentation within radio's public sphere.

When acclaimed poet Archibald MacLeish's anti-fascist verse play, "The Fall of the City," was broadcast on CBS on April 11, 1937, it was at the time (and since) understood as marking a significant turning point for literary authorship on the radio, for its explicit political challenge to the U.S. stance of neutrality, and for its

⁵ On the impact of African American culture on modernism, see Geoffrey Jacques, *A Change in the Weather: Modernist Imagination, African American Imaginary* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009) and James Smethurst, *The African American Roots of Modernism: From Reconstruction to the Harlem Renaissance* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

aural innovation.⁶ MacLeish was no stranger to the culture industries. Although family wealth and class confidence enabled him to develop his poetic voice among literary modernists and artists living in Paris in the 1920s, he had worked since 1929 as a writer for *Fortune* magazine, alongside the other poets and writers hired by Henry Luce to produce vivid prose investigative reporting on the then faltering American corporate industrial system.⁷ In the years after the crash, MacLeish turned toward the left, with a new mission “to integrate the role of the poet and the public man.”⁸ After winning the 1933 Pulitzer Prize in poetry for his long meditation on the vicious Spanish conquest of Mexico, he published *Frescoes for Mr. Rockefeller’s City* in cheap pamphlet form, declaring sympathy for Crazy Horse and the workers who built the railroads and opposition to robber barons, while also satirizing Communist ideologues.

MacLeish’s approach to radio followed his efforts to use poetry as a means to address public issues, and grew out of his experience in writing *Panic*, an agit-prop play in verse, in 1935. Determined to find a way to dramatize “what was actually

⁶ CBS director Douglas Coulter wrote that “Fall of the City” “was the first poetic work of permanent value to be written expressly for the air, the first to be submitted in shape to be broadcast without re-adaptation, the first to exploit the potentialities of radio for activating the imagination of the listeners:” in *Columbia Workshop Plays: Fourteen Radio Dramas*, ed. by Coulter (NY: CBS and Whittlesy House, 1939), 349; six of the fourteen radio plays Coulter selected were adaptations of stories published in *Esquire*, *Scribner’s*, *Forum*, and *Harper’s*.

⁷ MacLeish’s colleagues at *Fortune* in the first half of the 1930s included Dwight MacDonald, Wilder Hobson, Russell Davenport, Ralph Ingersoll, and James Agee; Robert Vanderlan, *Intellectuals Incorporated: Politics, Art, and Ideas Inside Henry Luce’s Media Empire* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania press, 2010), 91-124.

⁸ MacLeish quoted by Richard Somer, “The Public Man of Letters,” in *The Proceedings of the Archibald MacLeish Symposium, May 7-8, 1982*, ed. Bernard Drabeck et al (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1988), 117, as cited by Scott Donaldson, *Archibald MacLeish: An American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992), 226.

happening right around us” via poetry that would speak vehemently and directly engage an audience through performance, MacLeish worked out a design for a play using music, choral scenes, and archetypical characters, blaming capitalists for the economic collapse without acceding to Marxist economic determinism, and trying for an effect “in which the verse carries the action.”⁹

The same modernist salon sociability that led John Houseman to abandon grain trading and agree to direct Stein’s *Four Saints in Three Acts* provided MacLeish’s introduction to Houseman, who was clearly drawn to theatrical risk-taking, and who agreed to produce *Panic*. Houseman had just seen and heard the nineteen-year old Orson Welles performing Shakespeare on stage, and he wanted Welles, who had only recently returned from Europe and was supporting himself with anonymous radio parts, to play *Panic*’s powerful capitalist protagonist. Even though *Panic* only ran for three nights, it gave MacLeish an intoxicating experience of hearing his work performed and watching/listening to audiences respond. It marked MacLeish’s closer engagement with the left-wing organizations who sponsored the third evening’s show, including a post-performance debate about its political significance: “...the symposium afterward...was exciting as hell. I have never had such a sense of *audience* before.” This production also served as Orson Welles’s introduction to radical theater.¹⁰ A week later, when an excerpt from *Panic* was

⁹ MacLeish to H. Phelps Putnam [c. June 1934], in R.H.Winnick, ed., *Letters of Archibald MacLeish, 1907-1982* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982), 267

¹⁰ Richard Drabek and Helen Ellis, ed., *Archibald MacLeish: Reflections* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), 100-107; Simon Callow, *Orson Welles: The Road to Xanadu* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 196-205; Donaldson, *MacLeish*, 239-242; MacLeish in a letter to John Dos Passos, March 20, 1935, in Winnick, *Letters*, 275. MacLeish’s publisher Houghton Mifflin published a print version of the play the

broadcast on the Luce empire's radio show, *March of Time*, MacLeish got a taste for what radio could offer to drama, and Welles found work as a regular actor on that program.¹¹

MacLeish conceived of "The Fall of the City" as a verse play written specifically for radio, a medium intriguing to him as a potential platform for "dramatic poetry." The play's premise, civic leaders and crowds gathered in an unnamed public square in anticipation of the arrival of an unknown conqueror, drew both on historic images of the Spanish conquest of Aztec Mexico, and current headlines reporting German occupation of the Rhineland, Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia, and especially the fascist -supported Nationalist coup in Spain. MacLeish passionately believed that the Spanish Civil War was "the great try-out of Hitler and Mussolini, the preparation," and he wanted his warning of the conqueror to mobilize support for the Republican cause. He brought his new play to sound-engineer turned producer/director Irving Reis who was running CBS's Columbia Workshop, the network's cultural concession to the public interest requirement of 1934 broadcast regulation. The Workshop had announced its willingness to

week before the theatrical production. The third performance and debate were sponsored by the radical New Theater League and the left-affiliated literary journal, *New Masses*. Important African American actresses Rose McClendon and Osceola Archer had small parts in this play.

¹¹ For a full discussion of Welles' work on radio, see Paul Heyer, *the Medium and the Magician: Orson Welles, The Radio years, 1934-1952* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005); for the full chronology, see Orson Welles and Peter Bogdanovich, *This Is Orson Welles* (NY: Harper, 1992), 323-453.

“attempt anything unusual in voice and sound effect” to create compelling drama for listeners, and Reis immediately agreed to produce MacLeish’s play.¹²

A central structural aspect of “The Fall of the City” was its reliance on radio’s own techniques, what MacLeish called “the natural paraphernalia of the ordinary broadcast.” The play makes full use of a radio announcer, according to MacLeish, “the most useful dramatic personage since the Greek Chorus,” powerfully voiced by the young Orson Welles. Critic Neil Verma has argued that although Orson Welles’ announcer serves to guide the citizens in the square, and radio listeners, to truths they cannot see, Reis’s imaginative sound design, broadcasting from a New York armory, positions the radio audience as part of the crowd. This audiopositioning, using Verma’s term, created tensions between word and sound design, the expert and the people, that recur in various political formulations and artistic and cultural expression in this period.¹³

The excitement generated by MacLeish’s radio drama encouraged other literary figures, such as Stephen Vincent Benet and William Saroyan, to consider writing for radio. “The Fall of the City”’s anti-fascist warning continued to

¹² MacLeish: *Reflections*, 100-120. MacLeish was one of a group of literary radicals, including Dorothy Parker, who had raised the money in December 1936 to back Joris Ivens’ film, *The Spanish Earth*. The film group, calling themselves Contemporary Historians Inc., included also Lillian Hellman, Ernest Hemingway, and John Dos Passos, and Orson Welles recorded its narration in May 1937. MacLeish began to publish in *New Masses* in August and September 1936, and he joined the League of American Writers and chaired the opening session of its second Writers Congress in June, 1937; Donaldson, *MacLeish*, 262-266.

¹³; Verma, *Theater of the Mind: Imagination, Aesthetics, and American Radio Drama* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 17-31, 49-56. Different directors worked with the principal speakers, the crowd, and the sound, and CBS’s staff conductor Bernard Hermann composed and conducted the music effects. Hermann worked regularly as a musical director for Columbia Workshop and CBS, also composing for Hollywood films beginning in 1941.

reverberate. When CBS rebroadcast the play from Los Angeles, now utilizing the acoustics of the Hollywood Bowl, on September 29, 1938, following the German occupation of Austria and on the very night before the Munich meeting between Britain, France, Germany and Italy that acceded to Hitler's annexation of Czechoslovakia, the play's prescient warning now broadcast a direct indictment of "appeasement" to radio's listeners.¹⁴

MacLeish's second radio verse play, "Air Raid", broadcast on Columbia Workshop on October 26, 1938, protesting the horrors of the 1937 German-Italian bombing of Guernica, Spain, relied heavily on the radio/announcer format. The announcer, familiarly positioned as the credible eyes and ears of the listening audience, dramatically "reports" from a rooftop, narrating the terrors of a devastating aerial attack on civilians. In a fictional European border town, local women and children do not heed official warnings to take cover because they cannot anticipate this enemy's inhumanity or imagine death raining from the sky. One review described the play's power in capturing "not an air raid, but all air raids, the announcement, the incredulity, the expectation, the suspense... the crescendo of sound, the piercing shriek, the single questioning voice—silence."¹⁵ "Air Raid" was

¹⁴ MacLeish used the introduction of the published script to directly exhort poets to seize the power, innovative techniques, and legitimating force of the medium, writing; quoted in *Radio's Best Plays*, ed. Joseph Liss (NY: Greenberg, 1947), 5-7. MacLeish noted the enlarged broadcast audience for the 1938 and its timing in recollections, 108-9. CBS staged "The Fall of the City" a third time as part of its Columbia Workshop Jubilee Festival, this time from the Hollywood Coliseum with 2,000 student extras; Richard O'Brien, "Cradle of Drama: Workshop Celebrating Its third Birthday," *New York Times*, July 30, 1939, X10.

¹⁵ *Christian Century*, December 14, 1938, 1549, as cited by Donaldson, *MacLeish*, 270; see also *Time*, October 31, 1938, 34.

well received, quickly published in inexpensive book form, and also issued on 78rpm recordings.

In late 1938 MacLeish resigned from *Fortune* and soon moved into public service, holding government appointments in FDR's New Deal and wartime administrations. From these various official positions, MacLeish continued to write radio scripts that served morale building and wartime initiatives but without the broadcast impact of "The Fall of the City" and "Air Raid."¹⁶

The verse play "Murder of Lidice," written by widely acclaimed prize-winning poet and iconic literary modern Edna St. Vincent Millay, was an anti-fascist radio sensation when it was broadcast in October 1942. Millay wrote "Murder of Lidice" in response to a request from the War Writers Board for a poem to commemorate the horrific Nazi destruction of the entire Czech village Lidice, suspected of sheltering underground leaders. The resulting production, featuring unambiguous characterization of Nazi crime and Czech heroism via simple unadorned voices and music, amplified its message by featuring the voices of radio and film celebrities

¹⁶ MacLeish's 1939 poem "America Was Promises" was the basis of an NBC broadcast on its sustaining series, *I'm an American*, in 1940 and provided for the basis of a cantata broadcast on CBS's Columbia Workshop, April 25, 1940. As part of a group of left-wing writers calling themselves "The Free Company," he contributed a verse poem, "The States Talking" to their "unpaid, unsponsored, and uncontrolled" series of plays emphasizing civil liberties broadcast on CBS in the spring of 1941. In 1944, he wrote ten scripts for an NBC sustaining series *The American Story* emphasizing historical commonalities in the Americas, and he also wrote and participated in broadcasts debating proposals for the UN, "Building the Peace" on NBC's University of the Air" in 1945. MacLeish appeared on other radio programs, including a 1946 CBS symposium on the future of atomic energy and the October 1947 "Hollywood Fights back" celebrity defense of the First Amendment in the face of the unfolding House Committee on Un-American Activities investigations.

Alexander Woollcott, Paul Muni and Clifton Fadiman, all associated since the late 1930s with supporting anti-fascist causes. "Murder of Lidice" was broadcast on NBC national networks on October 19, 1942, and shortwaved to England and Europe, with Spanish and Portuguese translations transmitted to South American countries.

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The combination of Millay's literary celebrity and her publicly expressed urgency about defeating fascism encouraged various forms of cross-media promotion for this broadcast: vigorous press publicity beforehand, including an interview with Millay, and after it went off the air, a fund-raising auction of Millay's original handwritten to raise money for Czech refugee relief. Millay's publisher, Harper's, released a print version the next day; and magazines and a commercial recording circulated the poem even more widely.¹⁸

Millay anticipated that taking such a forthright and public political position in this verse play might damage her literary standing, but she was clear about her commitment: "I've enlisted for the duration. I've gone over the top, and I may not

¹⁷ Nancy Milford, *Savage Beauty: The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (NY: Random House, 2002), 469-71. As a young reporter for the *New York Times*, Woollcott had protested a 1911 Pennsylvania lynching; criticizing Hitler and Mussolini on air in 1936 cost him commercial sponsorship, but he continued to do broadcast as *the Town Crier* until CBS solicited another sponsor in January, 1937; Howard Teichmann, *Smart Aleck: The Wit, World and Life of Alexander Woollcott* (NY: William Morrow, 1976), 59-60, 199-200. A fifteen-minute version of "Murder of Lidice" was rebroadcast in 1943 on the Treasury Department's "Star Parade."

¹⁸ For example, see *New York Times* articles on Millay and the radio play on September 27, October 9, October 11, October 18, October 20, October 25, 1942; the interview, "Radio, War, and Poetry," appeared on October 18, 1942. The published play appeared in *Life* and *Saturday Evening Post*: Mike Chasar, "Poetry and Popular Culture," posted October 3, 2014 (<http://mikechasar.blogspot.com/2014/10/in-dc-with-edna-st-vincent-millay.html>); Columbia Recording 6 sides, M-536, recorded December 1942.

return, but I do not care. Poets and critics might criticize me for writing propaganda in 'Murder of Lidice' but this is no time to think of one's reputation when the world is in the midst of disaster." ¹⁹ Millay had a long history of taking public political positions, expressing a critique of war in her 1918 play, *Aria De Capo*, joining those protesting the death sentence for accused anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti and getting arrested for doing so in April 1927, personally entreating the Governor, and publishing her poem, "Justice Denied in Massachusetts" on the day before the execution. ²⁰

Millay had moved left in the 1930s, in an interview suggesting that the profit system should be abolished. She publicly supported the Republican side in Spain, and lent her name to fundraising appeals for Spanish refugees. By the late 1930s her writing for *Conversations at Midnight* and her poem "Say That We Saw Spain Die" announced her turn away from "ardent pacifism" to ardent antifascism: "Now the only hope for democracy is to fight for it." Millay published poems to mark the Nazi incursions: "Czecho-Slovakia" after Hitler stormed into Prague; a cry for U.S. intervention in "Lines Written in Passion and in Deep Concern for England, France, and My Own Country," published in newspapers on the day that Paris fell.²¹

¹⁹ "Radio, War, Poetry," *New York Times*, October 18, 1942, X10

²⁰ Milford, *Savage Beauty*, 183-4, 297-99.

²¹ Milford, *Savage Beauty*, 387, 404-407, 419-424, 431-435, 447, 450; Millay quoted on 423-4. Millay's public support for Spain in "Spanish Envoy to Speak," August 9, 1937, 7; "Fiesta to Aid Bureau in War Relief," December 19, 1937, 83, and "Thirty Four Leaders Appeal for End of Embargo," January 31, 1939, all in *New York Times*. "Lines Written in Passion" was published as a pamphlet in fall 1940. By 1935, Millay had attracted the attention of the FBI; in 1940, some criticized these poems as propaganda.

When Millay agreed to craft “Murder in Lidice” for radio, she had been publishing and performing poetry for more than two decades. Coming from a working-class female headed household, Millay needed to make her writing labor pay and she had begun to sell popular poems, and fiction (under an assumed name) to magazines beginning in 1918. Millay was the first woman to receive a Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1923. Her poetry conveyed modern New Womanhood as sexually alluring and self-determining, and her wildly financially successful readings across the country, utilizing her distinctive theatrical, carefully modulated, seductive vocal style (and which, she wrote to a friend, sometimes made her feel like a prostitute) continued through 1939.²² The 1927 opera, *The King’s Henchman*, for which Millay wrote the libretto based on an Anglo-Saxon period romance set the Metropolitan’s record for most frequently performed, and Millay’s libretto, quickly printed by her publisher, Harper and Brothers, sold out four editions in twenty days. By 1931, Millay’s poetry books were bestsellers.²³

Millay’s literary prestige, representative New Womanhood, and popular modern lyrical style had contributed to key moments in radio long before 1942’s “Murder in Lidice.” An abridged but live performance of *The King’s Henchmen* was the lead musical offering to inaugurate CBS’s first day of national broadcasting,

²² See Nina Miller, *Making Love Modern: the Intimate Public Worlds of New York’s Literary Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 16-40. Milford, *Savage Beauty*, 160,-1, 173-4, 181-7, 258-260 (reference to feeling “like a prostitute” at a reading Chicago in 1924 on 260), 420-429

²³ Milford, *Savage Beauty*, 332-333. The composer was Millay’s friend, music critic and composer Deems Taylor; Olin Downes, “The King’s Henchman,” *New York Times*, February 13, 1927; “Millet Play in Fourth Edition,” *New York Times*, March 9, 1927, 29

September 18, 1927.²⁴ Various forms of poetry reading had already appeared on early radio, when Millay began a series of national broadcasts reading her sonnets over the air, beginning Christmas Day, 1932. Her distinctive mode of public reading may have made its own significant contribution to radio's creation of an intimate public. These readings were arranged by Margaret Cuthbert, head of NBC's programming for women, and with her partner Alice Blinn, friends of Millay's husband Eugen Boissevain.²⁵

Later Cuthbert emphasized the significance of the broadcast in terms of literary celebrity, the triumph of a poetic performer earning the remuneration of distinguished actors and concert musicians. Although she needed the money, Millay wrote about these broadcasts as demanding and tiring labor. She had already learned to intrigue her lecture audiences with the quality and timbre of her (trained) voice, and to project a charismatic combination of presence and intimacy. She consciously utilized these techniques in her broadcasts, and literary critic Lesley Wheeler observed that Millay's contributions to radio's intimate address might have

²⁴ " 'King's Henchman' To Be Broadcast," *New York Times*, September 10, 1927, 15

²⁵ Municipal non-commercial stations WNYC and WEVD featured both "classic" and "modern" poetry, including work by Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Hart Crane, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Countee Cullen, and James Weldon Johnson. Roland V. Weber and Ada P. Beinhacker, "Poetry on the Radio," *Poetry* 36:4 (July 1930), 227-230; Milton Kaplan, *Radio and Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949), 4-25; Tony Wons, who began his radio career in Chicago reading Shakespeare, switched in 1930 to a very popular sponsored CBS "Scrapbook" series. Here he made full use of radio's intimacy capabilities, beginning each broadcast by asking "Are you listenin'?", and encouraging listeners to write to him and share their favorite poems, which he then published in best-selling collections; Erik Barnouw, *Media Marathon: A Twentieth Century Memoir* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996) 35-45; Mike Chasar, *Everyday Reading: Poetry and Popular Culture in Modern America* (NY: Columbia University Press, 2012), 80-122. On Millay's reading, see Lesley Wheeler, *Voicing American Poetry: Sound and Performance from the 1920s to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 39-59; Milford, *Savage Beauty*, 367-368.

made audiences listening in living rooms feel even closer to her than they might in a library or lecture hall. Choosing poems that were not challenging or particularly provocative and offering them as performance pieces without personal commentary made her seem both sincere and familiar.²⁶

Listeners delighted in these broadcasts, writing, for example, that they loved her voice that could transform “our country living room into a place of magic.” They especially appreciated what they heard as informality, as in her on-air brief reassurances to herself when she couldn’t find the poem she intended to read. Wheeler has noted that Millay’s broadcasts preceded FDR’s Fireside Chats by only a few weeks, and has assessed Millay as a fan of radio magic and an important contributor to it.²⁷ Millay returned to NBC radio in October 1939, speaking out to urge Americans to abandon neutrality and support the Allies.²⁸ Her familiarity with the culture industries, her public political sensibilities, and her prior radio experiences directed her literary path to “Murder at Lidice,” and contributed to its enthusiastic reception and wide circulation. Not surprisingly, NBC turned to Millay to commission verse for a special D-Day broadcast; her “Poem and Prayer for an Invading Army” was read on air by English actor (and WWI veteran) Ronald Coleman on June 6, 1944, and issued by NBC as a special broadside.

²⁶ Milford, *Savage Beauty*, 367-368; Wheeler, *Voicing American Poetry*, 46-52

²⁷ Listener quoted in Milford, *Savage Beauty*, 368; “News and Gossip of the Studios,” *New York Times*, January 22, 1933, X10; Wheeler, *Voicing American Poetry*, 48, 52, 55-59

²⁸ The occasion was a *Herald Tribune* forum on “The Challenge to Civilization;” Milford, *Savage Beauty*, 434-5.

Dorothy Parker's radio presence was inextricable from her unparalleled public literary position as perhaps her era's most frequently quoted writer of witticism, criticism, fiction and verse, many appearing first in New York's sophisticated magazines, and then collected in several best-selling volumes. A self-supporting writer since 1914, Parker became one of the best-known players in the creation of modernism circulated via popular literature and journalism in the 1920s. She was the only woman "regular" in the self-selected and well-publicized group of journalists, columnists, critics and playwrights identified as the Algonquin Round Table. The Round Table group placed a high premium on a kind of sophisticated cosmopolitan wit, a democratizing sensibility that relied in part on insights and observations deriving from the outsider position of those from Jewish origins. The Jewish-born "regulars" included the widely syndicated columnist Franklin Pierce Adams, the playwright George Kaufman, Alexander Woollcott, Harpo Marx, and Parker herself.²⁹

Before radio, Parker's literary work had enhanced New Women's claims on the public sphere. Literary critic Nina Miller has argued that Parker's poetry inverted the private voice supposed by lyric conventions by foregrounding the listening audience, making "the poem's public the site of her primary psychological investment," and transforming "the solitary musings of a speaker addressing only herself or the figure of her lover into essential public space and speech." Parker's poetry and short fiction exposed problematic expectations of social norms and heterosexual love, inviting her audience into a distanced stance. Miller suggests that

²⁹ Miller, *Making Love Modern*, 87-118.

Parker's creative work envisioning "self definition outside the heterosexual dyad" made a significant contribution to constructing a modern civic identity for women.³⁰

During the time that these literary strategies positioned Parker as a popularly-read woman writer who crossed over into financial success, she actively placed herself on the left. In the late 1920s she began to refer to herself as a socialist and in 1934, a communist; she attended and spoke eloquently at many benefit events, and generously lent her name for fund-raising efforts. She joined fights against what came to be called legal lynchings: picketing, getting arrested, and joining the final vigil in the 1927 campaign to protest the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti. After meeting Tom Mooney's mother in 1932, she publicly protested his imprisonment and visited him in jail. With other writers, she had objected to Daughters of the American Revolution blacklisting of "subversives" in 1928 and noisily protested a Louisiana lynching in 1935. As a Hollywood screenwriter, she hosted a fundraiser for the Scottsboro defendants.³¹

Parker seemed to have acted on an inchoate sense of connection between anti-Semitism and racism from early in her career, in 1924, walking out on drinks with the famous writer H.L. Mencken when he began to tell jokes about black people. Her 1927 short story "Arrangement in Black and White," published in the *New Yorker*, constituted a sharply observed and bold critique of the racism embedded in

³⁰ Miller, *Making Love Modern*, 119-141; quotes on 125.

³¹ Marion Meade, *Dorothy Parker: What Fresh Hell Is This?*(NY: Penguin, 1989), 137, 180-186, 223-224, 254; Ann Douglas, "Dorothy Parker," in *Notable American Women: The Modern Period* (Cambridge: Harvard University press, 1980), 522-525; "Speakers 'Blacklisted' to Defy D.A.R.," *New York Times*, May 1, 1928, 26; "Writers Scoring Lynching: League Protests to President, Long, and Louisiana Governor," January 13, 1935, *New York Times*, 33.

fashionable white social experiments in approaching black culture. In her review in *The Crisis*, the brilliant African American political journalist Marvel Jackson [later Cooke] applauded, “We take our hats off to Dorothy Parker.”³²

Parker’s seemingly effortless output of wit required intense and concentrated effort—“I can’t write five words but that I change seven.” She embraced radical organizing that recognized writing as labor and writers as potential labor unionists and labor allies. For example, she supported the Author’s League and the Newspaper Guild, and after 1934, when she followed the Depression migration pathway of other magazine wordsmiths to write for films in Hollywood, joined and then fought for recognition for the Screenwriters Guild.³³

As had been the case with MacLeish and Millay, Parker’s inchoate antifascism became more urgent when Spanish Civil War emerged as the first front of the

³² “Arrangement in Black and White, *New Yorker*, October 8, 1927; Marvel Jackson, “Reviews,” *The Crisis*, December, 1927, 338. Amelia Simpson identified the use of African American characters to witness and comment on the action in Parker’s prize-winning 1929 as “a clear example of the use of racial difference in white America’s contemplation of itself:” in “Black on Blonde: The Africanist Presence in Dorothy Parker’s “Big Blonde,” in *The Critical Waltz; Essays on the work of Dorothy Parker*, ed. Rhonda S Pettit (Madison, NJ: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2005), 187-199.

³³ Parker had briefly worked in Hollywood in the winter of 1928-1929. Marion Capron, “Interview with Dorothy Parker,” *Paris Review* 13 (1956); “Relief Funds to Gain by All-Star Review,” *New York Times*, January 23, 1933, 8. Parker joined the Screenwriters Guild in the fall of 1934; she defended the labor of writing in “To Richard With Love,” *Screen Guild Magazine* (May 1936), as cited by Pat McGilligan, *Backstory: Interviews with Screenwriters in Hollywood’s Golden Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 7; Nancy Lynn Schwartz, *The Hollywood Writers’ War* (NY: Knopf), 1982). See also her February 6, 1941 speech to the Disney Unit of the Screen Cartoonists Guild, cited by Meade, *Dorothy Parker*, 257, and Richard Fine’s discussion of shifting and interrelated writers’ economic opportunities in print and film culture industries in the 1920s and 1930s in *West of Eden: Writers in Hollywood, 1928-1940* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993)

struggle between fascism and Democracy. In the summer of 1937, she traveled to the front in Spain; Langston Hughes, who was also at there that summer, was impressed by her unobtrusive manner, “her famous wit bridled.”³⁴ After she returned, she wrote about what she witnessed in a powerful essay published in *New Masses* and, with a different title, in the *New Yorker*, and attached her name to events soliciting money for Spanish refugees, and other refugees from Hitler, for the next decade.³⁵

Parker became more immersed in the anti-fascist left in 1938 and 1939, more willing to speak at huge rallies in Los Angeles and New York, and more insistent in addressing the issues of her day, praising the poet who speaks “not just for himself but for all of us.” After the US entered the war, her name appeared prominently associated with broad labor/civil rights/anti-fascist coalitions. For example, in 1942 she chaired and addressed a dinner where Paul Robeson spoke and sang to raise money for “anti-Axis” refugees, and in 1943 she eloquently spoke at “An Emergency Conference to Save the Jews of Europe,” arguing that “no one of us can be whole and safe and free while there is one of those desperately wounded people, while there is one Jew in Europe driven and persecuted and tortured.”³⁶

³⁴ Parker was an initiator of the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League in October, 1936, and like MacLeish, she contributed money to Contemporary Historians’ *Spanish Earth* film project in December 1936; Paul Buhle and David Wagner, *Radical Hollywood* (New York: New Press, 2002), 78,89; Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes* Vol 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 348.

³⁵ Buhle and Wagner, *op. cit.*; Parker, “Incredible, Fantastic...and True,” *New Masses*, November 23, 1937; “Soldiers of the Republic,” *New Yorker*, February 1938; “Aids Spanish Children,” June 29, 1938, 9

³⁶ “Miss Parker Never Poses,” *New York Times*, January 8, 1939, 126; “Anti-Nazis Hear Warning: Audience of 4,000 Cheer Assaults on German Propaganda,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 31, 1938, 3; “10,000 Jam Garden in Reich Protest,” *New York*

Parker came to radio initially because her literary prominence and clever wit made her a sought-after guest on its commercial book programs. She made her first radio appearance on her friend Aleck Woollcott's lively and popular literary review broadcast, *The Town Crier*, early in 1934, and by the late 1930s, appeared several times on *Information Please*, *Author, Author*, and *Author's Quiz*.³⁷ Parker's radio prestige was enhanced by her Hollywood success as a screenwriter, especially after the Hollywood "success and heartbreak" fable, *A Star is Born*, with screenplay credited to Parker and her then husband Alan Campbell, became a big hit. *A Star is Born* was quickly adapted, and then readapted, for radio.³⁸ With the Federal Theater Project under attack by Congressional conservatives, Parker was among the cultural and political stars who came out to support its New York production of

Times, November 22, 1938, 6; "Not Enough," *New Masses*, March 14, 1939; "Writers Discuss New Opportunities: Field Has been broadened by Radio and Documentary Film," *New York Times*, June 4, 1939, 31; "Sophisticated Poetry—and the Hell With It," address to the American Writers Congress Poetry Session, June 3-5, 1939, printed in *New Masses*, June 27, 1939; "Plan Paul Robeson Dinner for March 23...Anti-Fascist refugees to Benefit," *Chicago Defender*, March 14, 1942, 10; "Dinner for Paul Robeson," *New York Times*, March 14, 1942, photograph of Parker with Robeson in *Amsterdam Star News*, March 28, 1942, 9; "US Help for Jews asked for by Alfange," *New York Times*, July 25, 1943, 39; Meade, *Dorothy Parker*, 253-258. [Meade on CP?269-275].

³⁷ On commercial book programs on radio, see Joan S. Rubin, *the Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 266-329. Parker's radio appearances listed in "Today on Radio," *New York Times*, March 14, 1939, 32; see also on April 4, 1939, 34; April 21, 1939, 42; June 9, 1939, 21. Parker appeared on *Author Meets Critic* on June 6, 1945, and on "Opinion Requested" on July 22, 1945.

³⁸ Working within the studio system, Parker defended her efforts on scripts she wrote, although she was rarely impressed by the films that eventuated: Buhle and Wagner, *Radical Hollywood*, 89. Although it did not win, the 1937 *A Star is Born*, starring Janet Gaynor and Frederick March was nominated for an Academy Award and was successful at the box office. "Adaptations of "A Star is Born" appeared on Lux Radio Theater, September 13, 1937 and December 28, 1942; on "Gulf Screen Guild Theater" on November 17, 1940; "Academy Award Theater, June 26, 1946, Ford Theater in May 23, 1948, and on Screen Director's Playhouse, June 16, 1950.

African American radical Shirley Graham's *Swing Mikado*, and she was among the those interviewed for a radio broadcast after its March 1, 1939 premiere.³⁹

When Parker's stories were performed on radio, their modern ironic distance on female socialization and heterosexual norms carved out some "women's space" in prime time within radio's public sphere, supplementing the often constrained gendered conventions of daytime. Columbia Workshop announced "Apartment to Let," a play dramatizing marital disunion and reunion by Parker and Campbell, as a featured prestige presentation on its "festival" line up, broadcast in August 1939. In the late 1930s and 1940s, actresses turned her stories into monologues on variety shows, and they were also read on radio "story" programs.⁴⁰ Broadcasting Parker's fiction enlisted radio's airwaves in her literary mode, identifying a modern civic identity for women.

Although limited to New York audiences, radio gave Parker's 1927 short story "Arrangement in Black and White" a new life and new meanings in 1944, when the talented African American journalist Roi Ottley adapted it for broadcast on his

³⁹ The production opened on arch 1, 1939; the post-premiere interviewees included Eleanor Roosevelt and Mayor Fiorello La Guardia as well as Parker and her friends Heywood Broun, and Franklin P. Adams, may have been broadcast on March 8, 1939; "A Happy Trio at the Opening of a WPA show Here, *New York Times*, March 2, 1939, 18; On the significance of this production, see Chris Vials, *Realism for the Masses: Aesthetics, Popular Front Pluralism, and U.S. Culture, 1935-1947* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2009), 42,68.

⁴⁰ Richard O'Brien, "A Cradle of Drama: Workshop Celebrating its Third Birthday, Offers Plays by Noted Writers," *New York Times*, July 30, 1939, X10; Parker stories appeared on *The World's Greatest Stories*, June 6, 1941, and on *Story Dramas*, December 8, 1941. Bankhead performed work by Parker on *The Royal Gelatin Hour*, June 17, 1937; and later on *The Big Show*, November 12, 1950, February 11, 1951, May 6, 1951, and January 27, 1952. Ilka Chase performed Parker on *Radio Hall of Fame*, March 5, 1944 and on record; "Records: Dorothy Parker Album," *New York Times*, August 27, 1944, X4.

extraordinary show, *New World A -Coming*. Ottley's show was premised on the idea that the war, and anticolonial insurgency throughout the world, created an unstoppable momentum for racial equality, and he introduced each broadcast with a musical signature composed by Duke Ellington and assurance of that "new world"'s arrival "with the sweep and fury of the resurrection." Prior shows in the series featured talented Black performers rarely heard on radio enacting survival, persistence, and resistance in confronting historical and contemporary obstacles caused by racial injustice.⁴¹ For Parker's story to be featured in this context reiterated Marvel Jackson's acclimation of her insights. Addressing white as well as black listeners, the dramatization of an encounter between a highly accomplished, Robeson-like African American concert singer and a self-congratulatory, pretentious, unthinking party guest provided an object lesson in what every-day white supremacy sounded like, conveying a powerful race-conscious critique off-limits in mainstream broadcasting.

After the war, Parker's literary and media prominence gave her extra clout when she spoke out as a sharp critic of radio's political concessions. Already drawn to the progressive organizing supporting labor and civil rights and defending the New Deal safety net against its conservative opponents, Parker helped to found and

⁴¹ Ottley's series began broadcasting on a public and unaffiliated New York network on March 3, 1944; John Hutchins praised it as "a project of first importance" in "This is Service," *New York Times*, March 19, 1944, X5. Parker's story was the tenth broadcast on May 7, 1944. As the honored guest, the concert singer Burrell Thomas performed four spirituals on air, including two particularly associated with Robeson. On the series, see Barbara D. Savage, *Broadcasting Freedom: Radio, War and the Politics of Race, 1938-1948* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 246-260, and Smith, "Visions of Belonging," 31-2. In 1944, Parker included this story in *The Portable Dorothy Parker*, an inexpensive, paperback anthology formatted for Armed Services circulation.

served as chair of the Voice of Freedom Committee, organized in the spring of 1947 in response to the pressure anti-communist surveillance began to exert on broadcasting. When liberal commentators like William Shirer began to lose their broadcasting jobs, the Voice of Freedom Committee organized rallies and meetings, petitions and monitoring campaigns addressed to the networks and the FCC. The Voice of Freedom Committee actively challenged radio's racist stereotyping and exclusionary employment practices, and Parker was one of the white signatories joining Paul Robeson, Langston Hughes, W.E. B. Du Bois and other prominent black artists, writers, musicians, and singers sponsoring the Committee for the Negro in the Arts conference call for a July 1949 broadcasting conference, publicizing radio's distorted characterizations of black people and demanding an end to its segregated practices in performance and production.⁴² Both Parker's literary and political voice made distinctive contributions to radio's public sphere.

⁴² Parker's left activism was visible in public: for examples, see "National PAC Votes to Continue Work," March 24, 1945, 14; "Oust Bilbo Move Grows: Authors Head New Group," November 23, 1946, 2; "Protest Radio Oustings," May 9 1947, 42; "2500 at Leftist Rally," June 12, 1947, 20; "19 Movie Figures to Fight Charges," November 3, 1947, 19, 14, in *New York Times*. On the Voice of Freedom Committee, see Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, *Waves of Opposition: Labor and The Struggle For Democratic Radio, 1933-1958* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 125-155; at Tamiment Library, see also *Counterattack's* Voice of Freedom Committee files, TAM148, Box 8, Folder 36-37 (Parker's financial contribution is noted in "Voice of Freedom Committee Tribute to William S. Gailmor, March 5, 1949), and the CNA conference call, PE.36, Box 24. Parker's political history is carefully documented by Millie S. Barranger in "Dorothy Parker and the Politics of McCarthyism," *Theater History Studies* (2006) 7-30.

Unlike MacLeish, Millay and Parker, Orson Welles did not come to radio with literary prestige. His artistry was associated with theater and later with film, but radio was a key arena that stimulated his creativity and on which he had a significant impact. Voracious cultural curiosity and confidence were one product of Welles's unusual and disrupted middle class upbringing in and around Chicago. After returning from Europe, Welles found his way into a left theatrical world which nurtured his own inclinations to defy cultural and social hierarchies, affirmed by the Federal Theater Project's democratizing experiment with innovative theatrical techniques and popular appeal. Radio work supported Welles as a young actor and as a theatrical visionary, and Welles was fascinated with the radio's special capacity for expanding the imaginative realm.⁴³

Welles's radio work was more collaborative than individual, much of it shaped by his productive association with John Houseman. The majority of his radio work involved adaptation, its own genre in the age of mechanical reproduction and electronic communication, out of which Welles and his collaborators created startling original effects. Looking across his work in theater and film as well as radio, Michael Denning has singled out Welles as the most important Popular Front artist, "both politically and aesthetically."⁴⁴ Work associated with Welles helped to carve out broadcasting space in various genres to address the dangers of fascism in Europe and on the home front.

⁴³ Callow, *Orson Welles: Xanadu*, 3-141; Hilmes, *Radio Voices*, 218-229; Paul Heyer, *The Medium and the Magic*. Welles's earliest published writing, co-authored with his high school mentor, was *Everybody's Shakespeare*, a how-to guide for adapting and school stagings, reprinted by Harper Brothers in 1934.

⁴⁴ Denning, "The Politics of Magic: Orson Welles's Allegories of Anti-Fascism," in *The Cultural Front*, 362-402.

When Welles was trying to establish himself in New York theater, radio was a new form of bread and butter for aspiring actors, and he auditioned assiduously, getting his first radio acting on a CBS educational program, and then on various series. After his part in *Panic* led to his first appearance on *March of Time*, Welles became one of its regulars, performing in its dramatic recreations of news stories drawn from Luce empire's *Time* magazine. Cross-fertilization of news and drama was appearing everywhere, from tabloid journalism to Warner Brothers crime stories, and it would be a staple of the Federal Theater Project when Living Newspapers dramatized "stage newsreels." *March of Time*, first on radio, and later on film, played an important role in popularizing news as re-enactment, blending reportage, sound effects, and melodrama.⁴⁵ Working from the inside, Welles absorbed its radio sound and drama techniques.

Welles worked across radio genres. Before he appeared as the announcing narrator in "Fall of the City," he had read poetry on Alexander Woollcott's *Town Crier* and in between musical segments on a CBS series called *Musical Reveries*, devised an adaptation of *Hamlet* in which he starred for Columbia Workshop, and had begun to voice the mysterious lead character of the long-running suspense series, *The Shadow*. His work on radio supported his risk-taking in theater, innovating with sound and stagecraft.

Welles became familiar with the modernist challenge of black arts and resisting black artists because his association with Houseman in *Panic* led to

⁴⁵ The chronology of Welles's career, including his radio work, appears in Orson Welles and Peter Bogdanovich, *This is Orson Welles* 1992: rpt NY, Harper Perennial, 1993), 323-453; Raymond Fielding, *The March of Time, 1935-1951* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1978); history of *March of Time* radio broadcasting, 9-19.

collaboration with the African American actress Rose McClendon on the Federal Theater Project's Negro Theater Unit. In April 1936, Welles directed an extraordinary Black cast production of *MacBeth*, set in Haiti during the reign of the early nineteenth century former slave turned Emperor Henri Christophe. In addition to the talented actors, Welles worked with many other Black artists on this production, writers Countee Cullen and Zora Neale Hurston, Sierra Leonean drummer Asadata Dafora, set designer Perry Watkins, musicians Eubie Blake and Leonard de Paur. His collaboration with Marc Blitzstein in the outlawed production of his experimental modernist labor opera, *The Cradle Will Rock*, performed in its impromptu form in New York, and on a local New York radio broadcast, in June 1937, and again in an "oratorio" version in the fall of 1937, provided Welles's entrée into left-wing cultural activism.⁴⁶

The fireworks connected to Welles's theatrical experiments led back to radio, and radio techniques became part of Welles's stagecraft. Shortly after the public drama of *Cradle Will Rock*, Welles was offered his first opportunity to produce, direct, star, and write a dramatic series of his own choosing, and he began to think through the challenges of narrative voice and point of view raised by radio storytelling. Partly as a result of Welles and Houseman's Mercury Theater Company's attention-getting staging of *Julius Caesar* as a modern-dress fascist allegory in November, 1937, CBS offer them a radio series. For radio, Welles planned to organize the radio storytelling around a character's "first person singular" narrative to enhance radio's intimacy affects, promising "to bring to radio the

⁴⁶ Richard Powell et al, *Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 37-43; Denning, *Cultural Front*, 373-3.

experimental techniques which have proved so successful in another medium, and to treat radio itself with the intelligence and respect such a beautiful and powerful medium deserves." Welles's radio adaptation of *Julius Caesar* in early September 1938 took MacLeish's use of a radio announcer as narrator up a notch by using a current well-known radio commentator, H.V. Kaltenborn, to "report" on the action of the play. By now, "announcing" in this context readily signaled an anti-fascist radio aesthetic.⁴⁷

The radio drama which gave Welles most notoriety was the startling Mercury theater adaptation of H. G. Wells's *War of the Worlds*, which aired just two months after *Julius Caesar*, and just a few days after MacLeish's "Air Raid." Here the use of radio announcer as a character was only one aspect of its expanded facsimile radio broadcast, including a weather report and dance music performed by a nightclub orchestra, building to the "we interrupt this program for a special bulletin" notification. Especially during the weeks of the Czech crisis in September, 1938, frequent program interruptions became the norm as radio news reports provided the most up to date accounts of Europe's slide into WWII. In the Mercury "War of the Worlds," the anti-fascist warning occurs only through the analogy that recent events in Europe had embedded in "we interrupt this program" notifications. In this broadcast, neither the various radio announcer characters or the expert, played by Orson Welles, were in control of the action. Neil Verma has identified the disorienting shifts in the news broadcast portion of the radio play as kaleidosonic

⁴⁷ "Welles to Direct Plays," *New York Times*, June 12, 1938, 150; Richard O'Brien, "The Shadow Talks," *New York Times*, August 14, 1938, 136; Denning, *Cultural Front*, 282-4

audiopositioning, the opposite of radio's intimacy mode. Denning noted that the Mercury adaptation also conveyed the limits of radio news and the potential failure of radio.⁴⁸ The popular sensation of radio's "War of the Worlds" led directly to Welles's opportunities in Hollywood and *Citizen Kane's* brilliant appropriation/parody of the newsreel form, appraisal of the isolationist positions and demagoguery associated with the Hearst empire, and self-reflexive commentary on showmanship and propaganda.

While working on *Kane* and other films, Welles continued find inventive broadcast opportunities to articulate anti-fascism, especially what he understood to be its expression on the homefront. Welles's original radio play, "His Honor the Mayor," was broadcast on CBS April 6, 1941. The mayor listened to all the dangers represented by his town's "domestic fascists," an anti-labor, anti-Mexican, anti-Semitic group of "White Crusaders" and anti-Communists in a "Veteran's League" while in the end dramatically asserting their right to assemble, implicitly defending left-wing free assembly and speech at the same time. The Hearst press and the American Legion immediately denounced the play as Communist propaganda, and the FBI prepared to open a file on Welles, although other reviews recognized and praised Welles's intended purpose to dramatize democratic protections guaranteed in the Bill of Rights.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ A. Brad Schwartz, *Broadcast Hysteria: Orson Welles's 'War of the Worlds' and the Art of Fake News* (NY: Hill and Wang, 2015) contains a full treatment of the context, origins, listener response, and newspaper treatment of the broadcast. See also Heyer, *The Medium and the Magician*, 75-122; Verma, *Theater of the Mind*, 65-72; Denning, *Cultural Front*, 381-384.

⁴⁹ Callow, *Orson Welles*: , 556-558. The play was part of the Free Company series, resulting from an initiative from Solicitor General Francis Biddle to writer James

Welles's familiar voice was frequently heard on the radio during the war years in radio dramas, hosting and appearing as a celebrity guest on popular variety shows. When he had control over airtime, he argued for the labor/civil rights/internationalism values associated with the popular front, never more powerfully than in his broadcasts in the summer of 1946 publicizing the brutal attack on the WWII veteran Isaac Woodard, travelling through the South in uniform. Working with the left-wing African American cartoonist Ollie Harrington, now working as publicity director for the NAACP, Welles created dramatic monologues for a series of broadcasts, deploying radio's intimacy effects as he directly addressed the police officer who blinded Woodward, insisting on accountability for the resurgence of racist terror attacks in response to wartime demands for expanding democracy. Harrington described Welles as taking "the role of somebody out hunting down these men who had committed that crime." The five broadcasts on the Woodard case were electrifying, generating thousands of listener letters, and eventually helping to push the Justice Department to file federal charges. But these broadcasts also generated opposition, especially from Welles's ABC network boss, ending his career on American radio, the medium that had consistently supported him, that he enthusiastically embraced, and that made him a household name.⁵⁰

Boyd for plays dramatizing democratic civil liberties. The series of plays "unpaid, unsponsored, unpaid, uncontrolled" also included contributions by playwrights and poets MacLeish, Sherwood Anderson, Maxwell Anderson, Stephen Vincent Benet, Marc Connelly, Paul Green, and William Saroyan. The plays by Benet and Green explored issues related to slavery and contemporary racial discrimination, and featured African American actors Eric Burroughs, Georgette Harvey, and Canada Lee.⁵⁰ The last *Orson Welles Commentaries* on ABC before Welles lost sponsorship protested the end of wartime rent and price controls and the A-bomb testing on Bikini; the Woodward broadcasts, unsponsored, appeared on July 28, August 5,

Norman Corwin brought neither literary prestige nor theatrical flair to radio, but in the late 1930s and through the war, he was recognized as the writer most responsible for “making poetry talk” on radio, where he wrote, directed, and produced many significant broadcasts. His turn to radio grew out of his culture industry jobs in newspaper reporting and movie publicity; reading poetry on the air was his first “authored” radio initiative. Like Welles, he was fascinated with radio’s capabilities to use sound to revise the way listeners moved through time and space in stories, and his anti-fascist convictions infused his writing and producing in a number of different radio genres. Critic Neil Verma has called attention to how Corwin’s characteristic broadcasts were particularly well situated to express solidarity in the age of the CIO. His hybrid use of intimate and kaleidosonic sound positioning encouraged listeners to identify and empathize with individual characters and to imagine the power and pleasure of crossing social and national boundaries in unity and solidarity. Using poetic assemblages of disparate voices, Corwin invited listeners to experience dramatic events as they affected ordinary families living through historical and contemporary crises, in familiar and far away places. In the build-up to war and for the duration, he was the writer of choice to create special broadcasts conveying urgent national concerns for the radio division of the Office of Fact and Figures (headed by CBS vice president William B. Lewis)

August 11, August 18, and August 25, 1946. The final broadcast of *Orson Welles Commentaries* was on October 6, 1946. Callow, *Orson Welles: Hello Americans* (London: Vintage Books, 2006), 323-346; Bogdanovich, *This is Orson Welles*, 398-401; Denning, *Cultural Front*, 399-400; Harrington quote from *Why I Left America and Other Essays*, (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1993), 103, cited by Denning on 400.

and for the Office of War Information (headed by CBS radio commentator Elmer Davis and writer and FDR speechwriter Robert Sherwood).⁵¹

Born in 1910 into a Jewish skilled printer's family in Boston, Corwin's political orientation developed in the 1930s. When he visited Germany in 1931, he began to understand more about its devastating losses during and after WWI, and the appeal of Hitler's promises for German revival through so-called "race purity." Pro-labor inclinations cost him a radio newsreading job in Cincinnati in 1935 when he refused to accede to a network policy forbidding the reading of any labor news. This policy must have seemed especially egregious in the face of recent newsworthy labor militancy demonstrated in the general strikes of 1934.⁵²

Corwin's political sensibilities shaped his poetic choices. He was critical of conventional radio poetry, which he characterized as syrupy renditions backed with dreary organ music. After moving to New York in 1936, he sought and won a weekly nighttime broadcast slot on an experimental New York area station for an on-air poetry show; he had already tried out such a program on a local radio station in Springfield. For selections on "Poetic License" he drew on modern poets, sometimes his own work, and used music, sound and choral effects, humor, and dramatic emphasis to enhance their popular appeal. The night Corwin's "Poetic License" show caught the attention of CBS executive William B. Lewis, he had

⁵¹ "Poems Become a Radio Show," *New York Times*, March 26, 1939, 144; R. LeRoy Bannerman, *Norman Corwin and the Golden Years of Radio* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1986); *Norman Corwin: Years of the Electric Ear*, an interview by Douglas Bell for the Directors Guild of America (Metuchen, N.J.: DGA and Scarecrow Press, 1994); Verma, *Theater of the Mind*, 73-78. See also Jacob Smith and Neil Verna, ed., *Anatomy of Sound: Norman Corwin and Media Authorship* (Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming).

⁵² Bannerman, *Norman Corwin*, 13-20

featured excerpts from prairie populist poet Edgar Lee Master's celebration of everyday small town people in *Spoon River Anthology* and the Greenwich Village bohemian New Woman poet Genevieve Taggard, whose poetry in the 1930s explored labor strikes, and class and race-based prejudice.⁵³

Corwin developed a distinctive style of poetic and political radio address at CBS, where he began to work in April, 1938. He learned radio directing on education series and a soap opera, and on Columbia Workshop, where he became familiar with the new sound techniques associated experimental anthology drama. By December 1938, Corwin was in charge of his own "radio poetry" series, *Norman Corwin's Words Without Music*. Here he began to use multi-voice narration, montage, and use of background effects to create a characteristic dramatic form of choral speech, using choral rhythms, counter-rhythms, and interweaving patterns. When he again directed excerpts from *Spoon River Anthology*, Masters, who had been invited to observe, was brought to tears by how much Corwin's actors sounded like the people he knew and wrote about. Later Corwin employed a "verse choir" group who specialized in blending low and high voices in harmony to enhance on-air performance.⁵⁴

⁵³ Kaplan, *Poetry and Radio*, 9; Bannerman, *Norman Corwin*, 21-30; Miller, *Making Love Modern*, 41-85. Edgar Lee Masters was one of the writers publicly arguing that the US should abandon neutrality and support the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War, along with Langston Hughes and Dorothy Parker. Other signers associated with radio include F. P. Adams, Maxwell Anderson, Sherwood Anderson and Clifton Fadiman; black signatories included W.E. B. DuBois, Countee Cullen, and James Weldon Johnson. In "98 Writers Score Spanish Rebels," *New York Times*, March 1, 1937, 7.

⁵⁴ Bannerman, *Norman Corwin*, 31-36,44; *Norman Corwin Interview*, 19-25, 34-35; Kaplan, *Radio and Poetry*, 102, 152: Corwin began to use the "Choralites" in the series of twenty-six plays he wrote for Columbia Workshop, beginning in 1941; see

Corwin's first original CBS presentation, "The Plot to Overthrow Christmas," was on the surface a playful rhyming entertainment, broadcast on December 25, 1938. Corwin later described himself as addressing the radio listener as a collaborator, and some listeners to this show might well have recognized his contemporary references in the play. The "veteran demons" planning to assassinate St. Nick included Haman, a historical despot associated with killing Jews, and Simon Legree, a literary figure of racist brutality. Legree's anti-Christmas plot borrows the apparatus of segregation, proposing to use Congress, bribe senators, buy votes so they can "legislate a situation to rule Christmas right out of the nation." This broadcast also let listeners in on the secrets of radio's artifice: a second narrator (called "Soto Voce") interrupts the story periodically to comment on the action and to call attention to the fades and gongs that mark change of scene, identifying the new sound techniques developed for guiding radio's audience through time and space.⁵⁵

Other *Words Without Music* shows revealed more explicit expressions of Corwin's anti-fascist politics. In January, 1939 he adapted excerpts from Carl

his discussion in "Life and Times of '26 by Corwin," *New York Times*, August 24, 1941, 14.

⁵⁵ Bannerman, *Norman Corwin*, 36-38; *Corwin* interviewed by Bell, 22. This play was rebroadcast on Columbia Workshop on Christmas, 1940, and again on CBS from LA with various different actors in 1944, and 1945. Eric Burroughs, a radical African American actor, played the leading part of the Emperor Nero in 1938 and 1944. Burroughs had gained notice in Welles's 1936 *MacBeth*, but Corwin remembered discovering Burroughs at a poetry reading; *The Poet Laureate of Radio: An Interview with Norman Corwin* (documentary, 2006; interview recorded in 2004). Corwin published the script in *The Plot to Overthrow Christmas: A Holiday Party* (Mt. Vernon, NY: Peter Pauper Press, 1940), *Thirteen by Corwin: Radio Dramas* (NY: Henry Holt, 1942), and the armed services editions, *Selected Radio Plays of Norman Corwin* (NY: Editions for Armed Services, 1944, 1945).

Sandburg's 1936 book-length prose poem, *The People Yes*, material to which he frequently returned. Although it intimates the possibility of fascism, Sandburg's poem celebrated the common sense and resilience of working people and of American vernacular democratic traditions. Sandburg's formulation, also admired by MacLeish, differed in emphasis from more explicit dramatization of the corrupting power of dictators and their abrogation of popular sovereignty, themes particularly compelling to Orson Welles. *The People Yes* offered a poetic reformulation of American history to emphasize ordinary working people, rather than powerful and wealthy business leaders and politician, as inventors and sustainers of American democracy, and it included a plea for a collective response to the era's economic and social crises. Corwin's program was quickly rebroadcast on Columbia Workshop, and rearranged, with a powerful musical score, in a 1941 version.⁵⁶

Corwin's air raid play, "They Fly Through The Air With the Greatest of Ease" wore its anti-fascist politics on its sleeve by focusing on the German-Italian collaboration in the bombing of women and children in Guernica, Spain, addressed two months earlier by MacLeish in "Air Raid." The language and the sound techniques moved listeners back and forth between the sky and the ground, juxtaposing the disengaged nonchalant musings of pilots aiming at their targets with

⁵⁶ Archibald MacLeish wrote a rave review of *the People, Yes* for the September 1936 *New Masses*; MacLeish's letter to Sandburg, July, 1936 in Winnick, *Letters*, 281-2. Corwin had previously used excerpts of *The People Yes* on CBS's educational program, *The American School of the Air*. The 1941 version was scored by the leftwing composer Earl Robinson, who would also compose the music for Corwin-initiated musical historical storytelling in the broadcast of "Ballad for Americans later in 1939, and "Lonesome Train" in 1944.

intimate family vignettes, featuring ordinary parents interacting with cherished children, the lives the bombs would shortly obliterate. Borrowing a light-hearted popular song about circus performers for a brutal account of the distancing capability possible in a bombing raid set the tone. One of the bombers described the view from the sky in the exact words Mussolini's son used in analogizing bombing Ethiopian cavalymen to "a budding rose unfolding." (Corwin made the attribution explicit in the published version of the script.) The calm and dispassionate tone of the narration reverberated against the sounds of destruction followed by silence, before the concluding commentary returns us to radio-style announcing on the time and feel of the midday. As part of the anti-fascist air raid genre, "They Fly Through the Air" brought Corwin national recognition. Letters poured into CBS, and the play was rebroadcast two months later, and quickly published in book form.⁵⁷

Corwin's wartime broadcasts created a distinctive form of nationalizing address. In the fall of 1941, Corwin was directed to write a special national broadcast celebrating the 150th anniversary of the Bill of Rights, pointedly celebrating American democratic protections to encourage national resolve in the build-up to the US entry into WWII. He sought dramatic material in the contentious debates generating amendments to mobilize support for ratifying the Constitution,

⁵⁷ Kaplan, *Radio and Poetry*, 61. "They Fly" was broadcast initially on February 19, 1939 for Corwin's program, *Words Without Music*; rebroadcast just two months later on Columbia Workshop on April 10, 1939, and then first published in May, 1939 (Weston Vermont: V.Orton); reprinted in Douglas Coulter's 1939 *Columbia Workshop Plays*, and then reprinted in *Thirteen by Corwin* (NY: Henry Holt, 1942), which also contained the script for "The Plot to Overthrow Christmas." Corwin's broadcast preceded the New York exhibition of Picasso's 1937 painting "Guernica" at the Valentine Gallery in May, 1939, and at Museum of Modern Art in November 1939; "Picasso's Mural on Bombing Hung," *New York Times*, May 4, 1939, 26.

researching after hours at Library of Congress. By the time that “We Hold These Truths” was broadcast on December 15, 1941, the Japanese military had bombed Pearl Harbor and the US was officially at war. The show, broadcast simultaneously on all four major networks, originating from three different cities and concluding with a special message from Roosevelt, reached a huge audience estimated at sixty-three million.⁵⁸

The populist historical pageantry in “We Hold These Truths” represented political actors as ordinary citizens, especially citizen soldiers, but this framing had certain limits. Although a reviewer for *Negro Digest* in 1949 remembered Corwin’s broadcasts including “unmistakable, militant, poetic references to discrimination and equal rights,” they did not include recognizable African American characters or voices, and women only entered the narrative as mothers or widows of soldiers. Corwin’s broadcasts marking the end of the war in Europe and Japan, “On a Note of Triumph,” and “August 14, 1945 “ emphasized the personal sacrifice and social costs of war, and the political and social imperatives of fighting to defeat fascism and create a lasting the peace, but were similarly limited in the conventions used to

⁵⁸ Corwin published the script for “We Hold These Truths” with Roosevelt’s address (NY: Howell, Soskin, 1942). The script also appeared in Norman S. Weiser, *The Writer’s Radio Theater, 1940-41* (New York, 1941); Margaret Mayorga, ed., *the Best One Act Plays of 1942* (NY: Dodd and Mead, 1943); in Corwin, *More by Corwin* (NY: Henry Holt, 1944), and in special armed forces editions, Corwin and Louis Untermeyer, *Selected Radio Plays of Norman Corwin* (NY: Editions for Armed Services, 1944, 1945)

represent “ordinary” citizenship. These conventions persisted across of much of Corwin’s highly inventive and much admired poetic radio programming.⁵⁹

The only Corwin programs that succeeded in broadcasting Black voices to proclaim “militant, poetic, references to discrimination and equal rights” relied on musical performers and a dramatic musical format, alternately called folk cantata, ballad opera, and “radiatorio.” This format derived from left-wing theatrical experiments and topical musical revues, what radio writer/editor Erik Barnouw described in 1945 as the “musical wing” of 1930s hybrid documentary drama. Beginning in the fall of 1939, when Corwin was responsible for directing a morale building variety-format series, *Pursuit of Happiness*, he seized the opportunity to engage Paul Robeson, the internationally recognized African American singer and radical political activist to sing “Ballad for Americans.” This musical piece defined “the people” in explicitly inclusive racial, gendered as well as ethnic terms, included the usually forbidden subject of lynching, and argued for civil rights as central to democracy (“men in white skin can never be free while his brother is in slavery.”) Both words and music became inseparable from Robeson’s personal and political authority. His performance, for which Corwin got the network to pay twice its usual rates, conveyed the urgency of redeeming democracy’s wartime promise of full

⁵⁹ An abridged version of “On a Note of Triumph” appeared in the August 1945 *Coronet*. The script was published by Simon and Shuster in 1945, in Margaret Mayorga, ed., *Best One Act Plays of 1945* (New York: Dodd and Mead, 1946) as well as in Corwin, *Untitled and Other Radio Dramas* (NY: Henry Holt, 1947); Robert Ellis, “How Radio Discriminates Against Negroes,” *Negro Digest* (June 1949), 64-66, quote from 65. Ellis quotes Corwin’s favorite example, from his April 18, 1944 play *Untitled*, memorializing dead GIs, where the dead GI says, “I want to hear a clause in the contract where the word democracy appears, and how the freedoms are inflected to a Negro’s ear;” 65.

African American citizenship.⁶⁰ In March 1944, when Corwin broadcast *Lonesome Train*, a partly sung, partly spoken eulogy posing Abraham Lincoln's heroism in the terms of contemporary civil rights, again Black voices articulated Black freedom.⁶¹ A month later, in April, 1944, with help from Langston Hughes and African American folk singer Josh White, Corwin directly confronted the reluctance to represent citizen soldier as Black by circulating an account of a Black hero ignored by the mainstream but lionized in the Black press. "Dorie Got a Medal," a "boogie-woogie biographical ballad" about Dorie Miller, the untrained Navy messman who deftly undermined the Navy's defense of its segregated practices when he took over the

⁶⁰ Corwin made suggestions on revising "Ballad for Americans" for radio: it had been originally written by Earl Robinson and John LaTouche for an unproduced Federal Theatre Project musical revue. The studio audience stamped, shouted and bravoed for two minutes before the show went off the air, continuing after. On "Ballad for Americans," see Denning, *Cultural Front*, 115-159; Martin Duberman, *Paul Robeson: A Biography* (NY: Ballantine, 1989), 236-7; Smith, "Radio's Cultural Front," 216; Lisa Barg, "Paul Robeson's Ballad for Americans: Race and the Cultural Politics of 'People's Music,'" *Journal for the Society of American Music* 2:1 (2008), 27-70. Earl Robinson also scored the 1941 "radiatorio" version of *The People Yes*. In 1976 he commented that "Sandburg's way of looking at the people [in *the People Yes*] is what's in "Ballad for Americans." David K. Dunaway, "Norman Corwin's The Lonesome Train Decca recording 1944," *RadioDoc Review*, 1 (1), 2014; accessed at <http://ro.uow.edu.au/rdr/vol1/iss1/7>

⁶¹ "Lonesome Train" was written by Earl Robinson and Millard Lampell in 1942. Again, audience cheering followed the conclusion of the broadcast. The program was rebroadcast as a Lincoln day presentation in 1945, and the script was published for classroom use in *Senior Scholastic*, February 5, 1945. After FDR died in April 1945, "The Lonesome Train" became the most widely-played radio program, broadcast by local stations across the country as the train carrying Lincoln's body traveled back to the Capitol. The script was published in Erik Barnouw, *Radio Drama in Action: Twenty-Five Plays of a Changing World* (NY: Rinehart, 1945) Decca recorded it in 1944; see Dunaway, "Norman Corwin's The Lonesome Train Decca Recording 1944."

anti-aircraft gun of a dead gunner and shot down four enemy airplanes during the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.⁶²

Widely-recognized poet Langston Hughes could “help” Corwin bring the Dorie Miller story to the airwaves. But even with his considerable literary stature, stature, he was rarely able to gain the access, available to other literary radicals, to radio’s public legitimacy, expanded literary marketplace and huge popular audience. More often he encountered frustration and obstruction.

Hughes’s body of work would seem to be particularly well-suited to an aural medium. Kansas City and Chicago blues performers were part of the soundscape of Hughes’s youth, and shaped his commitment to delivering voice and music associated with Black working people through his printed poems. By the mid-1930s, Hughes was a published poet and novelist and an aspiring playwright, and he had developed a successful strategy for reading/touring, varying his conventions from traveling preacher to cabaret, salon, and recital styling for different audiences.⁶³

Hughes moved left in the 1930s, publishing in *The New Masses*, dramatizing blatant Jim Crow injustices in *Scottsboro Limited* (1931), and living in the Soviet Union in

⁶² “When Dorie Miller took Gun in hand/ Jim Crow started his last stand” appeared in a poem written by Langston Hughes sometime in 1942, and published in a pamphlet of twenty Three poems, *Jim Crow’s Last Stand* (Atlanta: Negro Publication Society of America, 1943). “Dorie Got a Medal” featured the voices of Laura Duncan, Rosette LeNoire, Earl Hyman; piano music composed and played by Mary Lou Williams, with additional music and lyrics contributed by Langston Hughes, and musical performances by Josh White and the Golden Gate Quartet, who had appeared on Corwin’s series *Pursuit of Happiness* January 1940.

⁶³ Wheeler, *Voicing American Poetry*, 9-20, 62-68; Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes* Vol. 1 (1986; rpt: NY: Oxford University Press, 2002), 3-65, 211-234

1932-3. He was a vocal and public anti-fascist, supporting the Republican side in Spain, and travelling there in the summer of 1937. Shortly after returning, Hughes produced his own Black history merger of music, poetry and drama in the left wing cabaret revue style, titled *Don't You Want To Be Free? A Poetry Play From Slavery Through the Blues to Now—and then Some!—with Singing, Music, and Dancing*.⁶⁴

Like the other literary radicals, and with extra urgency as a Black artist, Hughes hoped his work might contribute to transforming the discourse in the public sphere, and he actively sought to work in the culture industries. He tried the film industry, but found it nearly impenetrable for a Black writer. The kinds of indignities writers faced in having their work altered beyond recognition by additional writers, directors and producers within the studio system were ten times worse for a Black radical, given high stakes in racial representation, the historical weight of stereotyping, and broad-based white resistance to any intimation of racial equality. White producers who might have sought out Black writers on the grounds of their familiarity with Black culture expected them to create the familiar accommodating film characterizations to which white audiences had become accustomed, and segregated working conditions were the norm in studio facilities. Hughes was expected to be grateful when he and Hollywood actor Clarence Muse

⁶⁴ Rampersad, *Langston Hughes* (Vol. 1), 214-220, 242-275, 284-295, 306-356; James Smethurst, *The New Red Negro: The Literary Left and African American Poetry, 1930-1946* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), 104-107, 114-115; *Scottsboro Limited* was published in *New Masses* 7, November 1931. *Don't You Want to be Free?* was published in *One Act Play* magazine 3:4 (October, 1938), 359-393.

were hired to prepare a story and screenplay for a 1939 film, which white critics and audiences lauded and Black critics condemned.⁶⁵

Radio was hardly more inviting. Hughes's work would have likely been known to Norman Corwin, and he was invited to submit scripts to *The Pursuit of Happiness*. But his musical play "The Organizer," dramatizing the struggle to form a Black and white sharecroppers union, was rejected immediately as "too controversial." The only script he could sell to CBS featured a model minority figure, accommodationist Booker T. Washington, to be aired in tandem with a new US Post Office stamp with his likeness. Hughes was approached to develop a commercial radio series based on "Little Ham," his Harlem comedy about the numbers racket. Such a series would be well paid, but also readily subject to network pressure to emulate *Amos 'n And*. Ultimately, the sponsors didn't buy it and the network lost interest.⁶⁶

Especially after A. Philip Randolph's threatened March on Washington in summer 1941 linked Black support for the war effort with the campaign to desegregate the military and war industries, it was clear to those in charge of "morale building" that they would need some kind of Black input. In the fall of 1941, CBS paid Hughes to broadcast a previously unproduced revue of black theatrical history he had written originally for a Chicago Negro Exposition. After Pearl Harbor,

⁶⁵ Rampersad, *Langston Hughes*, (vol. 1) 308-9, 367-372

⁶⁶ Rampersad, *Langston Hughes*, (vol. 1) 384; Savage, *Broadcasting Freedom*, 213-124. Corwin's critical memo on the series' refusal to take risks like "Ballad for Americans" in Bannerman, *Norman Corwin*, 49-51. When Barnouw later published Hughes's script for "Booker T. Washington in Atlanta," broadcast on April 7, 1940, he commented on "radio's tragic failure to give the Negro an even break" or acknowledge "society's failures towards him; *Radio Drama in Action*, 284-294; Rampersad, *Langston Hughes* (vol.2), 16-18.

the Office of Civilian Defense approached Hughes for scripts, but when he inquired about pay, he was told that “writers were not being paid to express patriotism.” He agreed to write some scripts anyway, but did point out that white writers had many opportunities to earn money that were closed to Black writers. Later, he complained to a close friend, “Nobody else connected with radio or theater works for nothing. Why should they expect the author to do so?”⁶⁷

Hughes’s support for Black involvement in the military was conditional on the Double V, linking victory over fascism abroad with victory over Jim Crow segregation at home. He wanted radio to help him to make this case. His submission to the Office of Civil Defense request was “Brothers,” a radio play racializing Roosevelt’s Four freedoms (freedom of speech and worship, freedom from want and fear) through the story of a Black sailor coming home from duty. This script was immediately rejected as “far too controversial.” Hughes’s response to the Office of Civil Defense charged that the radio industry “was a most reactionary and difficult medium in which to put forward any decent or progressive ideas about Negro life.”⁶⁸ Sharing with Parker an understanding of writing as a form of labor alongside his attention to the economics of racial discrimination, he observed to a friend that

⁶⁷ Rampersad, *Langston Hughes* (vol. 2), 27-28, Hughes to Arna Bontemps, March 17, 1943 cited on 69

⁶⁸ Hughes exchange with Office of Civilian Defense, December 31, 1941; Jan 31, 1942 in Rampersad, *Langston Hughes* (Vol.2), 39; Hughes to Arna Bontemps, March 17, 1943 cited by Rampersad, 69. Hughes submitted “Brothers” to the Treasury Department Defense Bond Drive in March of 1942, where it was again judged as too provocative for the airwaves; Rampersad, *Langston Hughes*, 45.

radio, like many war industries, was “trying their best to wriggle out of hiring Negroes.”⁶⁹

Discouraged about getting dramatic scripts on the air that introduced new Black kinds of characters who fought fascism and did not accede to Jim Crow, Hughes hoped his songs and poetry could make the case for Black freedom as integral to American wartime democracy. In 1942, he was able to get airtime for Kenneth Spencer’s powerful rendition of his popularly-styled anthem to the Double V, “Freedom Road,” on the Treasury Department’s *Treasury Star Parade* as well as on a *March of Time* segment. His recitation poem “Freedom’s Plow,” read on radio in 1943, emphasized the contributions of Black as well as white working people in building America.⁷⁰ A special wartime CIO broadcast in 1943 included poems and songs written by Hughes and performed by Paul Robeson that emphasized the significant contributions of black labor to U.S. victory, and Hughes’s short radio play, “John Henry Hammers It Out,” including Hughes’s song promising that “we’ll hammer it out together, White Folks and Black Folks Hand in hand.”⁷¹

Hughes was the only Black writer invited to serve on the advisory board of the War Writers Board that also included Edna St. Vincent Millay and Norman Corwin. He responded generously to the many requests he received, including

⁶⁹ LH to Noel Sullivan, June 20 1942, in Rampersad, *Langston Hughes* (vol.2), 46.

⁷⁰ The poem was read by actor Paul Muni, accompanied by the Golden Gate Singers, and with an orchestral score composed and conducted by the radical black musician Dean Dixon.; Rampersad, *Langston Hughes* (vol.2), 58. It was rebroadcast from Los Angeles in April, 1944: “Radio Series is Tribute to Our Langston Hughes,” *Chicago Defender* (ANP), April 8, 1944.

⁷¹ “Robeson, Hughes on CIO Radio,” *Chicago Defender*, June 26, 1943; Rampersad, *Langston Hughes* (vol.2), 71; James Smethurst locates this as a broadcast for the Michigan CIO following the 1943 Detroit riot in *The New Red Negro*, 11.

requests for radio scripts, while continuing to register objections to radio's continuing censorship of "any real dramatic approach to the actual problems of the Negro People." In 1943, the WWB quickly broadcast "In Service to My Country," a play Hughes wrote about interracial cooperation in building the Alaska-Canada highway, on New York City's public station. His play "Private Jim Crow," dramatizing the ordinary humiliations black soldiers encountered in the army, was never produced.⁷²

Radio did open some literary doors. Hughes appeared on radio book shows in 1941 and 1942 to read from and answer questions about his new book, *Shakespeare in Harlem*. He addressed listeners directly when he participated in an interracial panel for the New York-based NBC *America's Town Meeting of the Air* in early 1944 to discuss the topic "Let's Face the Race Question." The combination of his forthright attack on segregation, dissection of rhetorical opposition to "social equality," demand for federal action, and personal amiability and charm made a powerful impact. This appearance led directly to a new booking management by the top national speakers' bureau, and expanded invitations to address national white and black audiences.⁷³

Still, Hughes's most expansive opportunity to show how he might use radio could not be heard in the US. In 1944, Hughes prepared the script for a musical

⁷² Rampersad, *Langston Hughes* (Vol.2), 75, 77. "In Service to My Country" was broadcast on WNYC September 8, 1943.

⁷³ "Langston Hughes on Radio Program [Of Men and Books]," *Amsterdam Star News*, May 17, 1941, 16; Susan Ware, *It's One O' Clock and Here is Mary Margaret McBride* (NY: New York University Press, 2005) 187; Rampersad, *Langston Hughes* (vol.2), 83-84; Savage, *Broadcasting Freedom*, 210-214. Smethurst points out that Hughes's authors' note in *Shakespeare in Harlem* included his directions for "Blues, ballads, and reels to be read aloud, crooned, shouted, recited and sung;" *New Red Negro*, 145.

drama, “The Man Who Went to War,” a project commissioned by a BBC radio producer in association with folk music collector Alan Lomax, who worked during the war for the Office of War Information. For this ballad opera, intended to support the military effort by promoting cultural and interracial friendship between the peoples of Britain and the US, Hughes finally had free reign. He could make dazzling use of the language of blues and gospel, and he could mobilize radio’s intimacy effects while also moving listeners through time and space.⁷⁴

In Hughes’s dramatic vision, Black citizen/soldiers and Black women workers/ family members represent the ordinary characters with whom listeners are invited to identify, not the problem, not the other. They possess the personal, and musical resources of courage, spirit, caring, and commitment, partly drawing on their ability to resist injustice, that will allow them to inspire and sustain “everyone fighting today...all the people determined to win freedom for the world.”

⁷⁵ The story is set “anywhere that the war has been fought, anywhere that the bombs have fallen,” with scenes alternate between the soldier/husband (Canada Lee) serving with his buddies, and his wife (Ethel Waters) working in a war factory, and caring for a grandparent and a baby. Its revision of the anti-fascist air raid genre positions characters in an underground shelter during a terrifying and

⁷⁴ Rampersad, *Langston Hughes*, 82; Michele Hilmes, “Missing from History: Langston Hughes’ *the Man Who Went to War*,” posted on *Antenna*, June 12, 2015; Stephen Bourne, *Mother Country: Britain’s Black Community on the Home Front, 1939-1945* (London: the History Press, 2013); Savage, *Broadcasting Freedom*, 214.

⁷⁵ Hughes shared with other Black radicals a vision of race-conscious cosmopolitanism as a counter to white supremacist racialization, and a view that African Americans could represent the “universal people” because of their experience in fighting for freedom; see *Visions of Belonging*, 6, 208-213.

destructive attack from the air, resolved when the neighbor whose house is left standing takes in the family whose house is destroyed.⁷⁶

That this broadcast, fully conveying the breadth of his cosmopolitan racial vision in the public sphere, employing wonderfully talented African American actors and musicians, was heard by millions in the British Empire, but was not on the air in the US, just reinforced Hughes's anger at radio's racial intransigence. As he wrote the following year to Erik Barnouw, radio's efforts did not serve the public interest as far as race was concerned, rejecting dramas exploring ordinary African American lives in favor of keeping alive "the stereotype of the dialect-speaking amiably-moronic Negro servant as the chief representative of our racial group on the air." Hughes understood this limitation of radio as an example of domestic fascism: " ...RADIO... is almost as far from being a free medium of expression for Negro writers as Hitler's airplanes are for the Jews."⁷⁷

By the end of the war, the distinctive circumstances which had enabled literary radicals to command the airwaves were decisively altered. Radio changed; the non-commercial programming that had nurtured dramatic experimentation shrank as network executives raided radio to support the development of television and competition for advertising intensified. Postwar radio was not the same

⁷⁶ Bourne excerpted the air raid scene in *Mother Country*; Himes emphasized how representing African Americans managing Blitz-style bombings in a British underground air raid shelter enacts a transnational alliance. Smethurst observed that Hughes had imagined a link between police violence in Harlem and the Italian invasion and bombing of Ethiopia in his 1936 poem "Air Raid Over Harlem," *New Red Negro*, 112-113.

⁷⁷ Hughes to Barnouw, March 27, 1945, as cited by Savage, *Broadcasting Freedom*, 214.

medium for writers. The political environment changed. After Roosevelt's death, unquestioning support for the Allies gave way to uncertainty about the Soviet Union's territorial repositioning, and Truman's "get tough with Russia" foreign policy.

The broadcast industries were the first target of growing conservative opposition, with entertainment columnists, church and veterans groups joining congressional committees to define support for refugees, labor, and desegregation as "un-American" and to identify those warning of Nazi incursions as "premature anti-fascists." In 1950 the blacklisting "bible," *Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television*, published entries on Parker, Welles, Corwin and Hughes. By this point Welles had already fled to Europe, Corwin had already been forced out by CBS, Millay would soon be dead, MacLeish turned to university teaching, Parker and Hughes eked out what living they could from print. The formidable force of broadcast blacklisting offers an ironic testimony to their powerful dramatic impact when these literary radicals had access to radio's public sphere.