

THE RADICAL CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT: THE HIGHLANDER FOLK SCHOOL AND THE LEGACIES OF THE LEFT IN COLD WAR AMERICA*

In the spring of 1965, hundreds of billboards arose across the American South purporting to show Dr Martin Luther King Jr at a ‘Communist training school’. The image featured on the billboards was of a crowded room with King seated towards the front, an arrow labelled ‘King’ pointing at his chest (see [Plate 1](#)). No one else in the photo was identified. The school was not named. The power of the image depended on viewers accepting without evidence that the gathering in question involved ‘Communist training’. Asked about the billboards during a broadcast of *Meet the Press*, King explained that the image had been taken at the Highlander Folk School, a small institution in the hills of Tennessee that had ‘pioneered in bringing Negroes and whites together at a time when it was very unpopular to train them for leadership’. King denied that Highlander was a ‘Communist training school’, and noted that ‘great Americans such as Eleanor Roosevelt, Reinhold Niebuhr, Harry Golden, and many others’ had supported the school. The journalists on *Meet the Press* neither confirmed nor denied his assertions, leaving it to viewers to decide what to believe.¹

The photo was taken in the fall of 1957. Before it was plastered on billboards, the image was deployed within a four-page broadside entitled ‘Highlander Folk School: Communist Training School, Monteagle, Tenn.’. Produced by the Georgia

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¹ Martin Luther King interviewed on ‘Meet the Press’, 28 Mar. 1965, at <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4533944/user-clip-martin-luther-king-meet-press> (accessed 23 Feb. 2022); James Zeigler, *Red Scare Racism and Cold War Black Radicalism* (Jackson, MS, 2015), 18–45 and 191–7.

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Education Commission, an agency established by the governor to defend the 'Georgia way of life', the broadside blended anti-communist conspiracy theories with anti-integration hysteria. The Education Commission distributed over two hundred thousand copies, and the White Citizens Council, the Ku Klux Klan, and other white supremacist groups reprinted thousands more in a co-ordinated attack upon Highlander as a 'Communist training school'. With help from the governments of Georgia and Arkansas, authorities in Tennessee launched multiple investigations of Highlander that culminated in a raid on the school, the revocation of its charter, and the confiscation of its land and buildings. Yet Highlander survived and the story of its survival offers a unique perspective on how civil rights activists fought against racist propaganda within Cold War America.²

Founded in 1932 with the goal of training 'rural and industrial leaders for a new social order', Highlander had long been attacked as 'subversive'. In December 1932, the local school board barred Highlander staff from county school buildings on the grounds that the school's curricula were 'Red or communist in appearance'. Three years later, when Highlander's leaders helped organize the All Southern Conference for Civil and Trade Union Rights, the American Legion and the local police violently evicted the 'Reds' from town. The most devastating anti-Highlander campaign began in 1957 with the photo that purported to show Martin Luther King at a 'Communist training school'. Although this campaign was cloaked in the rhetoric of anti-communism, the primary reason Highlander was targeted was the fact that the school was racially integrated and hosted civil rights activists like King and Rosa Parks. In the photo that would be plastered across billboards, Parks is seated in the same row as King and Highlander's director, Myles Horton. Under the leadership of Horton and Septima Clark, an African American educator who became Highlander's director of workshops in 1956, the school became one of the nerve centres of the civil rights movement. In the eyes of many segregationists,

² 'Highlander Folk School: Communist Training School, Monteagle, Tenn.', at <<http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/highlander/efhf003.pdf>> (accessed 23 Feb. 2022); M. J. Heale, *McCarthy's Americans: Red Scare Politics in State and Nation, 1935–1965* (Athens, GA, 1998), 246–65; John M. Glen, *Highlander: No Ordinary School, 1932–1962* (Lexington, 1988); Frank Adams with Myles Horton, *Unearthing Seeds of Fire: The Idea of Highlander* (Winston-Salem, 1975).



1. 'Billboards: Martin Luther King at Communist training school (Selma, Alabama) (24 Aug. 1965)', Robert Joyce Papers, 1952–1973, Historical Collections and Labor Archives, Special Collections Library, University Libraries, Pennsylvania State University.

that was sufficient proof that Highlander was indeed a 'Communist training school'.³

At the heart of Highlander's pedagogy was the belief that people from all backgrounds could discover for themselves the solutions to their own problems. 'You don't have to know the answers', Horton explained. 'The answers come from the people'. It was the school's democratic philosophy of education and social change — a philosophy based on the idea that 'the answers come from the people' — that most directly refuted the claim that Highlander was a 'Communist training school'. Unlike their segregationist opponents, Highlander's leaders

³ Many anti-communist segregationists ignored the heterogeneity of socialism and communism, as well as the differences between such ideologies and particular organizations such as the Socialist Party or the Communist Party. See Yasuhiro Katagiri, *Black Freedom, White Resistance, and Red Menace: Civil Rights and Anticommunism in the Jim Crow South* (Baton Rouge, 2014); George Lewis, *The White South and the Red Menace: Segregationists, Anticommunism, and Massive Resistance, 1945–1965* (Gainesville, 2004); Jeff R. Woods, *Black Struggle, Red Scare: Segregation and Anti-Communism in the South, 1948–1968* (Baton Rouge, 2003). Also see Katherine Mellen Charron, *Freedom's Teacher: The Life of Septima Clark* (Chapel Hill, 2009); Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley, 1995); Glen, *Highlander*, 3, 51–2, 146.

aimed to generate debate and to encourage participants to decide for themselves what to think and how to act.⁴

It would be a mistake to draw too sharp a line between Highlander, communism and the Communist Party — and not just because one of Highlander’s founders later joined the Party and the school hosted Communist organizers in the 1930s and 1940s. More important is the way that Highlander’s leaders helped forge and sustain the ‘Popular Front’ that brought together organizations and individuals across the American Left. This article builds upon the work of Michael Denning, Bill Mullen and other scholars who have approached the Popular Front from the vantage point of culture and who have traced its legacies into the 1940s. I argue that Highlander helped to extend those legacies into the 1950s and 1960s by creating a space in which civil rights activists could explore and reimagine many of the radical goals that defined the Popular Front: racial integration in the North as well as the South; a world free of imperialism; and an egalitarian economy based on worker’s rights and strong unions. To be clear, all of these ideas pre-dated the shift in Comintern policy in 1934 that led to the creation of ‘popular fronts’ in the United States and elsewhere. The roots of the radical solidarities advanced at Highlander stretched back to the interracial inclusivity of the abolition movement and to the dynamic radicalism that had been cultivated within Southern African American communities for decades before 1934. But Highlander was shaped by the Popular Front and, although Communists would be largely absent from the folk school in the 1950s and 1960s, the school continued to safeguard an expansive conception of the legacies of the Popular Front. In the face of one of the most vicious and well-funded anti-communist campaigns of the 1950s and 1960s, Highlander remained a small but influential bastion of radicalism, connecting civil rights activists to traditions of resistance from across the American Left.⁵

⁴ Stephen A. Schneider, *You Can’t Padlock an Idea: Rhetorical Education at the Highlander Folk School, 1932–1961* (Columbia, SC, 2014); Myles Horton, with Judith Kohl and Herbert Kohl, *The Long Haul: An Autobiography* (New York, 1998), 23.

⁵ The historian Robin Kelley has argued that the Popular Front weakened Communist activism in Alabama. As Kelley has demonstrated, it is important to not romanticize the achievements of the Popular Front or to obscure the significance of earlier strands of radical activism. Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill, 2015), xx;

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For over three decades now, historians have debated the relationship between the civil rights movement and the Cold War. On the one hand, we know that American powerbrokers — from presidents to diplomats to Supreme Court justices — came to see Jim Crow as a Cold War liability.⁶ On the other hand, scholars have examined the impact of the Red Scare on the two most prominent icons of the Black Left, W. E. B. Du Bois and Paul Robeson, and have argued that anti-communism destroyed the Popular Front coalitions of the 1930s and 1940s and narrowed the goals and methods of the civil rights movement.⁷ The story of Highlander could be used to document both ‘sides’ of the relationship between the Cold War and the civil rights movement (although, as we will see, it is misleading to suggest that such a complex relationship had two clear sides). Highlander’s staff and supporters often responded to anti-communist disinformation by pointing out that it was segregationists who were providing ammunition for Soviet propaganda. During his speech at Highlander, for example, Martin Luther King argued that ‘southern intransigence fortifies communist appeals to Asian and African peoples’. Yet even if the ‘Cold War civil rights’ narrative was echoed at Highlander workshops, the fate of the school itself demonstrates the devastating power of anti-communist witch hunts.⁸

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Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1997); Bill V. Mullen, *Popular Fronts: Chicago and African-American Cultural Politics, 1935–1946* (Urbana, IL, 1999); Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA, 2003); John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (Cambridge, MA, 2004); Benjamin Balthaser, *Anti-Imperialist Modernism: Race and Transnational Radical Culture from the Great Depression to the Cold War* (Ann Arbor, 2015); Manisha Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven, 2017).

⁶ Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge, MA, 2001); Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, 2000).

⁷ Robbie Lieberman and Clarence Lang (eds.), *Anticommunism and the African American Freedom Movement: ‘Another Side of the Story’* (New York, 2009); Carol Anderson, *Eyes off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944–1955* (Cambridge, 2003); Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937–1957* (Ithaca, NY, 1997); Gerald Horne, *Black and Red: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Afro-American Response to the Cold War, 1944–1963* (Albany, 1986).

⁸ Martin Luther King Jr, ‘A Look to the Future’, Address Delivered at Highlander Folk School’s Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Meeting, 2 Sept. 1957, available at <<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/look-future->

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While most recent accounts acknowledge both that the Cold War provided some degree of leverage for civil rights activists and that the Red Scare had harmful impacts on the freedom struggle, a key point of contention remains the degree to which the civil rights movement was constrained by Cold War politics. From Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein's influential 'opportunities found and lost' thesis to Jaqueline Dowd Hall's widely debated framing of the 'long civil rights movement', a range of scholars have argued that anti-communism separated the 'classical phase' of the movement, usually dated from 1954 to 1965, from its more radical roots. In the words of Dowd Hall, 'The civil rights unionism of the 1940s — which combined a principled and tactical belief in interracial organizing with a strong emphasis on black culture and institutions — was lost to memory'. While recognizing the profound harm caused by the Red Scare, this article demonstrates that 'civil rights unionism' and other achievements of the 1930s and 1940s were not 'lost to memory' — indeed, they continued to thrive at Highlander and among many of the civil rights activists who visited Highlander.⁹

I argue that Highlander survived Cold War repression while embracing economic justice, transnational anti-colonial solidarities, and other radical causes that are often presented as casualties of the Cold War. I am not alone in arguing for such continuities. Many historians would agree with Alex Lichtenstein that 'a vibrant political culture of civil rights persisted throughout the 1950s, with links to anti-colonial struggles, a commitment to fair employment (though not to "super-seniority"), and a concern with economic justice'.¹⁰ Several scholars have argued that liberal anti-communist

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address-delivered-highlander-folk-schools-twenty-fifth-anniversary#ftnref9> (accessed 23 Feb. 2022).

⁹ Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, 'Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement', *Journal of American History*, lxxv (1988); Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, 'The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past', *Journal of American History*, xci (2005); Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, xx; Risa Goluboff, *The Lost Promise of Civil Rights* (Cambridge, MA, 2007); Nancy MacLean, *Freedom Is Not Enough: The Opening of the American Workplace* (New York, 2006), 31; Robert Rodgers Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South* (Chapel Hill, 2003).

¹⁰ Alex Lichtenstein, 'Consensus? What Consensus?', *American Communist History*, xi (2012).

activists and organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) advanced many of the goals associated with the Popular Front.¹¹ And there is a robust literature on what Dayo Gore has called ‘the range of black left activism that continued in the midst of anti-Communism’.¹² But a profound gap divides the work produced by scholars of the Black Left such as Gore from the scholarship on the liberal activists who Carol Anderson has dubbed ‘bourgeois radicals’, a gap that leaves unclear which traditions of struggle were most important during the ‘classical phase’ of the movement, as well as how those traditions were taken up and reimagined by grassroots activists. The history of Highlander helps fill that gap by revealing how a range of ideas associated with the American Left were examined, debated and communicated to a new generation of civil rights activists. At the core of my argument is the way in which Highlander’s democratic approach to education created a space in which Leftist ideas and strategies could coalesce, a space that stood in sharp contrast to both the fantasy of a ‘Communist training school’ and to the anti-communist segregationists who propagated that fantasy. Both in the content of its workshops and the manner in which they were organized, Highlander preserved the heritage of the American Left in ways that help to explain how many civil rights activists came to reject Communism *and* the Red Scare, to embrace civil liberties *and* economic justice, and to respect local traditions of African American resistance *and* expansive anti-colonial solidarities.

I begin by tracing Highlander’s contribution to a ‘Southern United Front’ forged in the 1930s by Socialists and Communists and protected by powerful allies in the New Deal coalition.

¹¹ Carol Anderson, *Bourgeois Radicals: The NAACP and the Struggle for Colonial Liberation, 1941–1960* (Cambridge, 2015); Eric Arnesen, ‘Civil Rights and the Cold War at Home: Postwar Activism, Anticommunism, and the Decline of the Left’, *American Communist History*, xi (2012); Shana Bernstein, *Bridges of Reform: Interracial Civil Rights Activism in Twentieth-Century Los Angeles* (Oxford, 2011); Manfred Berg, ‘Black Civil Rights and Liberal Anticommunism: The NAACP in the Early Cold War’, *Journal of American History*, xciv (2007).

¹² Dayo F. Gore, ‘“The Danger of Being an Active Anti-Communist”: Expansive Black Left Politics and the Long Civil Rights Movement’, *American Communist History*, xi (2012); John Munro, *The Anticolonial Front: The African American Freedom Struggle and Global Decolonisation, 1945–1960* (Cambridge, 2017); Carole Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones* (Durham, NC, 2008).

Using the over a thousand pages of FBI files on Highlander, I also explore the earliest waves of anti-communist repression directed at the folk school. That repression intensified in 1957 in the wake of the infamous photo of King at Highlander. In section II of this article, I examine how that photo was used to attack both Highlander and the ‘United Front’ that Highlander fought to protect and expand. I contrast the anti-Highlander campaign with the seminar at which the photo was taken, and argue that Highlander’s commitment to student-driven learning was central to its ability to connect the civil rights movement to ideas and strategies developed over generations of the American Left. It was not only the content of Highlander’s workshops that served as a bridge with earlier struggles. It was also Highlander’s egalitarian, racially integrated community of learning that empowered civil rights activists to rediscover and reimagine the legacies of the Left. Civil rights activists, in turn, saved Highlander. In section III, I explore how Highlander’s leadership responded to fierce anti-communist repression, and argue that ultimately it was Highlander’s ties to the civil rights movement that allowed the folk school to thrive within Cold War America. The history of Highlander thus reveals both the roots and the power of the radical civil rights movement.

I

FORGING A ‘SOUTHERN UNITED FRONT’

On 29 December 1934, a group of union organizers, anti-racist activists, and socialist leaders met at Highlander to endorse a plan for a ‘Southern United Front’. The plan had been developed earlier that month at a meeting organized by the Birmingham-based Communist leader, Nat Ross. In January 1935, Ross praised the Highlander gathering in the *Daily Worker*, the journal of the Communist Party USA, and quoted Myles Horton as saying that ‘the best radical work in the South was the exceptional work being done by the CP in the Birmingham area’. Although Horton never verified the accuracy of that quote, he did collaborate with several Highlander leaders in an effort to pull the Socialist Party towards an alliance with the CP. One of Highlander’s founders, Don West, joined the CP, although it remains unclear if he did so while based at Highlander. In the spring of 1935, West, Horton and many of Highlander’s early

supporters helped organize the All Southern Conference for Civil and Trade Union Rights, a gathering that brought a range of Socialists and Communists to Chattanooga. This was the meeting that was disrupted by the American Legion, forcing the conference participants to relocate to Highlander. It was from the folk school that they called for the destruction of 'all armed fascist bands (K. K. K. etc.)', defended 'the right of all citizens, white and Negro, to vote without payment of the poll tax', and demanded the 'immediate repeal and defeat of all existing and proposed sedition and anti-labor laws'.¹³

By 1935, the relationship between Socialists, Communists and the African American freedom struggle already had a long and multifaceted history. In the case of the CP, that relationship had been strengthened by the response of the Party to the arrest of nine African American teenagers, the 'Scottsboro Boys', who were accused of raping two white women in a case that would become an international emblem of racist injustice. To oppose such injustice, Highlander's leaders worked closely with CP organizers to foster an anti-racist Popular Front. The origins of the Popular Front are often traced to a shift in Comintern policy. But the actual work of building the coalitions at the heart of the Popular Front was done by local activists. In 1934, one of Highlander's founders, Jim Dombrowski, attended the 'Negro-White Conference' at Shaw University in North Carolina, a conference partly organized by the African American Communist, Max Yergan. Dombrowski told the theologian and Highlander supporter Reinhold Niebuhr that the Negro-White Conference tried to 'promote a revolutionary viewpoint particularly among Negroes . . . and bring some pressure from the left upon the existing organizations in the field, e.g. NAACP, and others'.¹⁴

¹³ Nat Ross, 'Southern United Front Plans Broad Campaign for Rights of Toilers', *Daily Worker*, 5 Jan. 1935, 4; Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 120–1; Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919–1950* (New York, 2008), 176 and 213.

¹⁴ Erik S. Gellman, *Death Blow to Jim Crow: The National Negro Congress and the Rise of Militant Civil Rights* (Chapel Hill, 2012); Susan D. Pennybacker, *From Scottsboro to Munich: Race and Political Culture in 1930s Britain* (Princeton, 2009); James E. Goodman, *Stories of Scottsboro* (New York, 1994); Mark Solomon, *The Cry Was Unity: Communists and African Americans, 1917–1936* (Jackson, MS, 1998); Gilmore, *Defying Dixie*, 221 and 269–71.

Highlander's support for unions and civil rights attracted the ire of several local industrialists, including C. H. Kilby of the Tennessee Consolidated Coal Company. Kilby denounced Highlander in a series of letters to the FBI, fomented opposition in regional newspapers, and organized a local group, the Grundy County Crusaders, whose chief purpose was to harass the folk school. On 19 February 1942, the Highlander newsletter, *The Fling*, mocked Kilby's claims that 'the Highlander Folk School is a hotbed of communism, the Russian flag is saluted at the end of every class and the students sing "Keep the Red Flag Waving"'. But while Highlander's leaders responded to Kilby with derision, the FBI secretly began investigating the school. Fortunately for Highlander, the school had powerful supporters, many of whom were prominent New Dealers. The same edition of *The Fling*, a copy of which was retained by the FBI, featured a letter from Eleanor Roosevelt. 'I have had the school checked by people in whom I have absolute confidence', Roosevelt wrote, 'and am convinced that the newspaper attack and the groups which have been opposed to you are not opposed to you because of any Communist activities but because they are opposed to labor organization and, therefore, labor education'.¹⁵

It is telling that Roosevelt did not deny that Highlander had ties to the CP. It is impossible to know how many of the workers and labour organizers who came to Highlander in the 1930s and 1940s were members of the Communist Party but many were affiliated with unions that had strong ties with the CP, such as the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers. Roosevelt was well aware of the 'United Front' that Highlander's leaders were working to build. Along with several Highlander affiliates, she had attended the founding of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare (SCHW), one of the most prominent organizations to emerge from the Southern United Front in the 1930s. Like the SCHW, Highlander attracted liberal New Dealers and radical Socialists and Communists. In the spring of 1941, for example, Highlander hosted John T. Jones, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) legislative

¹⁵ 'Crusaders Seek to Close HFS', *The Fling*, 19 Feb. 1942, in 'Highlander Folk School', FBI Report made at Knoxville, TN, 30 Dec. 1941, 'Highlander Folk School Part 4 of 19', p. 42, FBI Records: The Vault, <<https://vault.fbi.gov/Highlander%20Folk%20School/Highlander%20Folk%20School%20Part%204%20of%2019/view>> (accessed 23 Feb. 2022).

representative, who spoke about ‘the fight against the poll tax’. The audience included miners, teachers, agricultural labourers, and construction workers from eight states. The workshop dovetailed with a special weekend conference that drew eighty-one participants, including Lewis Wade Jones, an African American sociologist from Fisk University; Gerald Harris of the Alabama Farmers Union; and Joseph Gelders, the Communist secretary of the civil rights committee of the SCHW.¹⁶

Despite Roosevelt’s endorsement, the FBI continued its surveillance of Highlander. On 10 May 1942, Paul Robeson headlined a fundraising concert for Highlander at Riverside Stadium in Washington, DC. Some five thousand people heard Robeson sing folk songs from around the world. The FBI attached newspaper articles on the concert to a report issued in July of that year, a report for which an agent interviewed Myles Horton. According to the agent, Horton denied that the school was controlled by Communists and added that ‘any correspondence between the policies advocated by the Communist Party and those advocated by the Highlander Folk School were purely coincidental’. On 27 July of that year, J. Edgar Hoover wrote to the Special Agent in Charge in Knoxville requesting a ‘comprehensive review . . . reflecting all information contained in the files wherein there are indications of Communist control or influence in the administration of the Highlander Folk School’. The Knoxville office issued their review on 12 September. The last sentence of the twelve-page report offered this conclusion: ‘Although the school has been branded by many as Communistic, there is very little indication of Communistic influence while there is [*sic*] abundant indications that the school is liberal and radical and, therefore, opposed by Conservatives’. Hoover replied a month later that ‘further active investigation of this school is not warranted’. But this reprieve would prove temporary.¹⁷

¹⁶ Press Release dated 26 May 1941, signed by Myles Horton, included in ‘Highlander Folk School’, FBI Report made at Knoxville, TN, 30 Dec. 1941, ‘Highlander Folk School Part 3 of 19’, pp. 38–9, FBI Records: The Vault, <<https://vault.fbi.gov/Highlander%20Folk%20School/Highlander%20Folk%20School%20Part%203%20of%2019/view>> (accessed 23 Feb. 2022); Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 144–6; Gilmore, *Defying Dixie*, 221 and 269–71.

¹⁷ ‘Highlander Folk School’, 9 July 1942; John Edgar Hoover to Special Agent in Charge, Knoxville, Tennessee, 27 July 1942; ‘Highlander Folk School’, 12 Sept. 1942; and J. Edgar Hoover to SAC, Knoxville, 23 Oct. 1942, all in

(cont. on p. 12)

In the late 1940s, Highlander's refusal to bend to the resurgent Red Scare brought the school even closer to African American freedom struggles — and again under FBI surveillance. In 1949, the CIO expelled ten unions that were seen as 'Communist-controlled' and asked several CIO affiliates, including Highlander, to endorse a statement denouncing communism. Highlander's leadership refused and the CIO cut off ties with the folk school. Despite the rising tide of intolerance, Highlander remained a bastion of Popular Front inclusivity, bringing together radical union organizers and civil rights activists. Its interracial commitments earned the ire of segregationists and the attention of the FBI, which sent several agents to interview Highlander's neighbours regarding its integrated workshops. In a letter to Highlander's supporters, Myles Horton suggested that the FBI need not 'harass neighbors with questions linking Negroes with communism' when they could 'catch us red handed practicing racial democracy by a visit to the school'. Thus, Horton revealed Highlander's most effective strategy for countering propaganda — a relentless commitment to living the future they hoped to create. He also demonstrated that in 1950 Highlander still retained many powerful supporters, several of whom wrote to the FBI to complain about the suggestion 'that inter-racial education is somehow "subversive"', to quote the words of a letter that Roger N. Baldwin, the director of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), sent to J. Edgar Hoover.¹⁸

Horton himself wrote to the assistant director of the FBI, Hugh Clegg. 'I was pleased to read from the International Labor News Service that you feel that the "success of communism" can be measured by the weaknesses of democracy', Horton told Clegg. 'I am led to believe by your analysis of the situation that you would approve the enclosed statement of policy of the Highlander Folk School'. The statement of policy rejected

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'Highlander Folk School Part 8 of 19', pp. 9, 16–17, 28, and 32–46, FBI Records: The Vault, <<https://vault.fbi.gov/Highlander%20Folk%20School/Highlander%20Folk%20School%20Part%208%20of%2019/view>> (accessed 23 Feb. 2022).

¹⁸ Roger N. Baldwin to J. Edgar Hoover, 14 Feb. 1951, 'Highlander Folk School Part 10 of 19', p. 11, FBI Records: The Vault, <<https://vault.fbi.gov/Highlander%20Folk%20School/Highlander%20Folk%20School%20Part%2010%20of%2019/view>> (accessed 23 Feb. 2022); Glen, *Highlander*, 3, 51–2, 146.

‘totalitarian communism’ as well as ‘fascism or monopoly dominated capitalism’. It declared: ‘We hold that democracy is inactive unless workers are given a full voice in industry through unions; or farmers are given a voice in the market place through cooperatives; or where freedom and discussion is limited; that democracy is outlawed by legally entrenched discrimination and segregation’. This list echoed the demands that had been drafted fifteen years earlier during the All Southern Conference for Civil and Trade Union Rights. Throughout the 1950s, Highlander would carry forward such an expansive Popular Front vision of democracy. To defend such radical goals in the Jim Crow South had always been dangerous. Unions were weaker in the South than in the North, and the racial regime gave those in power additional tools with which to crush radical movements. Highlander’s work would become even more difficult and even more dangerous after the civil rights movement inspired ‘massive resistance’ from segregationists — and after that photo of Martin Luther King directed that resistance towards the folk school itself.¹⁹

II

THE PHOTOGRAPH AND THE WORKSHOP

In the summer of 1957, Highlander celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary by inviting a few hundred activists and educators to attend a four-day seminar on ‘The South Looking Ahead’. Many of those who attended the seminar had long been supporters of the school, but two of the visitors were unknown to the Highlander staff: Abner Berry, an African American communist who wrote for the *Daily Worker*, and Edwin H. Friend, a white photographer who was secretly spying for the state of Georgia. Both Berry and Friend concealed their identities. Their presence might have been less consequential if not for the fact that the main speaker at the gathering was Martin Luther King. It was Friend who took the infamous photo of King at the ‘Communist training school’, and it was Berry who provided, by his mere presence, a veneer of truth to the claim that Highlander was a

¹⁹ Myles Horton to Hugh H. Clegg, Assistant Director, FBI, 10 Dec. 1950 and ‘Statement of Purpose, Program and Policy’, in ‘Highlander Folk School Part 9 of 19’, pp. 65 and 67, FBI Records: The Vault, <<https://vault.fbi.gov/Highlander%20Folk%20School/Highlander%20Folk%20School%20Part%209%20of%2019/view>> (accessed 23 Feb 2022).

Communist institution. Just before Friend took the photo, Berry inserted himself into the camera's frame by kneeling down in front of King. The photograph that brought them together — King, Berry and Friend — obscured the complexities of their lives and motivations, revealing what the scholar Leigh Raiford has called 'the tensions between captivity and fugitivity, the contradictions inherent in attempting to fix that which by its nature is mobile and mercurial'. But if the photo elided the 'fugitivity' of that moment, the image itself proved equally 'mobile and mercurial'. This is not a case of a static image failing to capture a dynamic reality. The photo itself would have a strange and surprising future.²⁰

Photographs had long played a multifaceted role within the struggle over white supremacy. Many of the most profound turning points in that struggle hinged on the power of an image: the mangled body of Emmett Till; the stoic calm of fifteen-year-old Elizabeth Eckford surrounded by a screaming mob in Little Rock; non-violent Black protesters being attacked by white thugs during sit-ins and freedom rides and on the streets of cities like Birmingham, Alabama. As historian Martin Berger has argued, many of the most famous images portrayed African Americans as the helpless recipients of white violence, obscuring the agency and the anger that had driven the movement forward. In addition, as historian Robin Kelley has shown, some of the photographs that seemed to reveal civil rights activists being attacked were in fact images of African American bystanders who were pulled into chaotic scenes by the indiscriminate violence of white police officers. These images simultaneously underestimated the agency of Black activists and overestimated their numbers. While photographs played an important role in advancing the African American freedom struggle, they were often used — even by allies — in ways that misrepresented that struggle. There were tactical reasons for civil rights leaders to present African Americans as victims. But to the degree that images devalued Black agency, they played into one of the key

²⁰ 'Abner Berry', Oral History of the American Left, OH 002, Box: 12 Cd: Berry 1-6 (Access cd), Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University Libraries, <<http://digitaltamiment.hosting.nyu.edu/s/cpoh/item/3862>> (accessed 23 Feb. 2022); Leigh Raiford, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill, 2013), 4.

myths deployed by white supremacists — that the civil rights movement was the work of ‘outside agitators’.²¹

Such a devaluation of Black agency shaped the history of that photo of King at the ‘Communist training school’. Tellingly, the photo was not on the cover of the broadside. It was tucked in the bottom corner of the third page. The primary target was not King but Highlander. On the cover was a large photo of Myles Horton and the Reverend John B. Thompson, the chaplain of the University of Chicago, who chaired the anniversary seminar (see [Plate 2](#)). The caption stated that both men had ‘long been regarded as useful aids to the Communist apparatus’. The pamphlet offered little evidence that Horton, Thompson or Highlander had been ‘useful aids to the Communist apparatus’. Most of the ‘evidence’ came via guilt by association. Abner Berry’s presence proved crucial. He was featured in three photos and identified in the captions of all three in a way that suggested that he was not just a visitor but was sent by the Communist Party to oversee the proceedings. Consider this description of one of the photos: ‘Rosa Parks, who precipitated the Montgomery Alabama Bus Boycott, and Ralph Tefferteller of New York’s Henry Street Settlement listen to group training under the watchful eye of Abner Berry of the Central Committee of the Communist Party’. Berry was indeed ‘watchful’, but not as the description insinuated. He was an onlooker at the event, without any authority to guide the conversations. The text noted that Berry reported on the Highlander seminar in the *Daily Worker*, yet failed to offer any quotes from that article. That omission is not surprising given that Berry’s article offers no evidence that he judged the gathering based on ‘Party principles’. He celebrated Highlander for transgressing racial boundaries, and such transgression was in line with Party doctrine. But Berry’s article could have been published in any liberal magazine.²²

The Georgia Education Commission’s pamphlet focused on proving two related allegations — that Highlander was a

²¹ Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York, 1994); Maurice Berger, *For All the World to See: Visual Culture and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New Haven, 2010); Martin A. Berger, *Seeing through Race: A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography* (Berkeley, 2011).

²² ‘Highlander Folk School: Communist Training School, Monteagle, Tenn.’; Abner Berry, ‘On the Way’, *Daily Worker*, 19 Sept. 1957.

Communist institution, and that Communists used Highlander to secretly direct the civil rights movement. Despite its narrow focus, the Commission's broadside offered conflicting assessments of the relationship between communism and civil rights. Consider the caption to that famous image of King:

Pictured Here (foreground) is Abner W. Berry of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. On the first row are Reverend Martin Luther King (2nd from right) of the Montgomery Boycott, Aubrey Williams (3rd from right) president of the Southern Conference Education Fund Inc. and Myles Horton (4th from right) the director of Highlander Folk School. These 'four horsemen' of racial agitation have brought tensions, disturbance, strife and violence in their advancement of the Communist doctrine of 'racial nationalism'.

The emphasis on 'strife and violence' and on 'racial nationalism' suggested that Communist forces were trying to drive the races apart. Yet the photos provided were all of interracial harmony. Along with images of integrated groups swimming and dancing, readers were offered what were meant to be scandalous facts such as this: 'Both the day and night life at Highlander Folk School Labor Day Weekend Seminar were integrated in all respects'. Although readers were left to imagine for themselves what 'all respects' might insinuate, the message was clear: the real danger was not 'interracial strife' but its opposite — love and especially sex across the colour line. In the *Daily Worker*, Abner Berry celebrated the fact that at Highlander integration 'includes everything — eating, sleeping, games, study, swimming in the lake, and the open-minded ease with which human beings regard all other human beings'. Berry and the segregationists agreed on the most striking facet of the gathering at Highlander — the fact that it was racially integrated (see [Plate 3](#)).²³

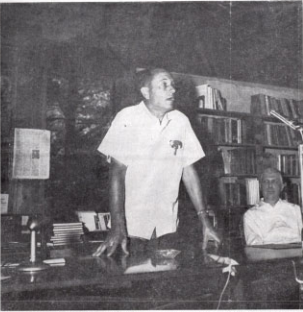
In the absence of direct evidence of Communist control of Highlander, the text relied on old stereotypes of African Americans as incapable of the kind of strategic thinking required to generate a mass movement. Beneath a photo of Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King and Ralph Abernathy, one caption declared: 'Three outstanding leadership people of the infamous Montgomery, Alabama, bus incident. The development, precipitation and financing of this inflammatory project called for behind the scenes planning and direction beyond the ability

²³ 'Highlander Folk School: Communist Training School, Monteagle, Tenn.:', Berry, 'On the Way'.

HIGHLANDER FOLK SCHOOL

Communist Training School, Monteagle, Tenn.

LABOR DAY WEEKEND, 1957
During Labor Day weekend...



Communist Front Records Of Leadership Of Highlander Inter-racial Seminar, 1957

During Labor Day weekend...
Affiliation of persons in connection of the Labor Day Training 1957 Seminar at Highlander Folk School, Monteagle, Tennessee.

THE SCHEDULE OF HIGHLANDER SCHOOL

LABOR DAY WEEKEND, 1957
The schedule of the Highlander Folk School...

LABOR DAY WEEKEND, 1957
LABOR DAY WEEKEND, 1957
LABOR DAY WEEKEND, 1957



House Committee Citations

HOUSE COMMITTEE CITATIONS
The House Committee on Un-American Activities...

HIGHLANDER ACTIVITIES
The Highlander Folk School...

LABOR DAY WEEKEND, 1957
LABOR DAY WEEKEND, 1957
LABOR DAY WEEKEND, 1957

2. Highlander Folk School, Labor Day Weekend at Communist Training School, 1957, Governor's Office Files, Ernest Vandiver Papers, Richard B. Russell Library for Political Research and Studies, University of Georgia.

or capacity of local people'. The idea that the leaders of the Montgomery Bus Boycott would need to come to Highlander to receive 'behind the scenes planning and direction' was more than a racist misreading of the organizational talents of the leaders of the boycott; it was also a wrong-headed view of Highlander's approach to education. Participants in Highlander's workshops were not told what to think or do. Rather than instruct students on how to address their problems, Highlander staff encouraged students to learn from each other — and from their own past experiences. Whereas the broadside deployed photographs in order to assert authority over the truth,

Highlander's staff encouraged workshop participants to pursue their own understanding of the truth.²⁴

Consider the seminar at which the photo of King at the 'Communist training school' was taken. While that photo was used to demonize Highlander and King by telling viewers what to think, the seminar was designed to generate debate and to foster dynamic conversations. Visitors offered first-hand reports on 'integration beachheads' and discussed their experiences of the struggle for integration. Participants included academics such as the sociologist Dr John Hope II, pastors such as D. H. Brooks of Tallahassee, and community leaders such as Charles Gomillion from Tuskegee. The two keynote addresses came from Aubrey Williams and Dr King. Yet many of the participants were relatively unknown figures without advanced degrees, and the communal living situation brought everyone together as equals, not just in the workshop conversations but over the dinner table, during square dances, and in sing-alongs led by Pete Seeger. If such open-ended and non-hierarchical interactions constituted 'Communist training', then the billboards were accurate in locating King at a 'Communist training school'.²⁵

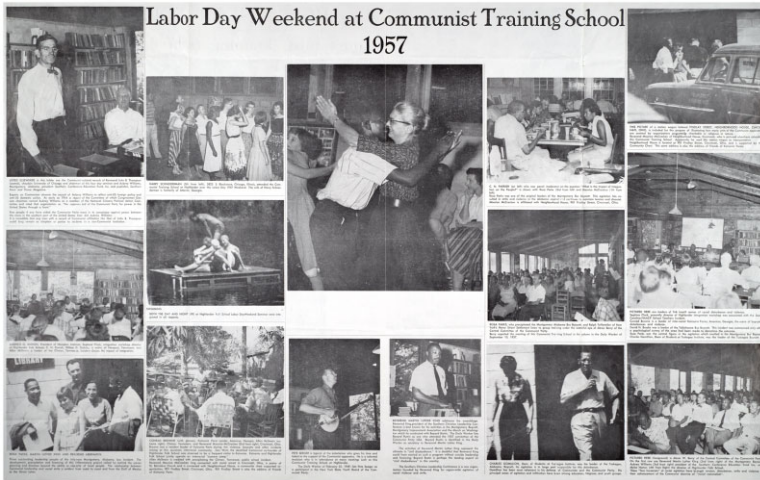
In contrast to the kinds of indoctrination most segregationists associated with such a label, King's lecture suggested a distinctly democratic, non-hierarchical understanding of the relationship between education and social change. He began by praising Highlander. 'I have long admired the noble purpose and creative work of this institution', he told the audience. 'You have given the South some of its most responsible leaders in this great period of transition'. It matters that King did not praise Highlander for teaching its students particular ways of thinking or acting. Rather, he praised the school for generating new grassroots leaders in the struggle for racial integration. He recognized Rosa Parks in particular. 'You would not have had a Montgomery story without Rosa Parks', he declared.²⁶

Parks came to Highlander in the summer of 1955. She was already a seasoned activist, having worked for years with the NAACP. In Montgomery, the NAACP was led by E. D. Nixon, an active member of A. Philip Randolph's Brotherhood of

²⁴ 'Highlander Folk School: Communist Training School, Monteagle, Tenn.'

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ King, 'Look to the Future'.



3. Highlander Folk School, Labor Day Weekend at Communist Training School, 1957, Governor's Office Files, Ernest Vandiver Papers, Richard B. Russell Library for Political Research and Studies, University of Georgia.

Sleeping Car Porters. In part because of her ties to Nixon, Parks had long been familiar with the blend of anti-racism and civil rights unionism she encountered at Highlander.²⁷ What was more surprising for Parks was the way the folk school linked its radical politics to an egalitarian and racially integrated community. 'At Highlander', Parks later recalled, 'I found out for the first time in my adult life that this could be a unified society, that there was such a thing as people of differing races and backgrounds meeting together in workshops and living together in peace and harmony'. 'It was a place I was very reluctant to leave', she added. 'I gained there strength to persevere in my work for freedom, not just for blacks but all oppressed groups'. By offering such an expansive vision of struggle, Parks echoed a principle at the heart of many Highlander workshops — that fighting for a better world

²⁷ Eric Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality* (Cambridge, MA, 2001); John White, 'Nixon Was the One: Edgar Daniel Nixon, the MIA, and the Montgomery Bus Boycott', in Brian Ward and Tony Badger (eds.), *The Making of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement* (New York, 1996), 45-63.

required opposing the intersection of multiple forms of inequality and injustice.

That expansive vision of struggle extended beyond the borders of the United States, as Highlander encouraged workshop participants to advance anti-colonial solidarities. In 1951, the Indian Socialist Rammanohar Lohia spoke to ‘several dozen farmers and coal miners’ at Highlander, and encouraged them to consider using ‘non-violent direct action’. ‘We use this way of struggle against our unjust land tenures — what you call sharecropping’, Lohia explained. Throughout his time in the United States, Lohia encouraged audiences to take up non-violence against American racism and class inequality, demonstrating the global resonance of the radical politics pursued at Highlander. In August 1954, Myles Horton told a Highlander workshop that ‘problems like segregation affect our relations with the rest of the world’. Rather than link such a statement to the Cold War, Horton turned to a transracial and transnational conception of colour. Across the world, he explained, ‘the majority are colored’. Yet in the American South ‘colored people’ continued to be oppressed by Jim Crow. Such transnational conceptions of race and colour surfaced at many Highlander gatherings.²⁸

In November 1960, Reverend George ‘Ed’ Riddick, an African American activist based in Chicago, linked the teachings of Gandhi and Martin Luther King to anti-colonial struggles in Africa. ‘We’re not just responsible for ourselves’, Riddick stated, ‘we’re responsible for Nyerere in a place like Tanganyika’, as well as for anti-colonial and anti-racist struggles in Kenya and South Africa. Riddick noted that Americans were often asked overseas, ‘You’re so good, you preach freedom and democracy and everything like that, how come a Negro can’t live on the north side of Chicago?’ Rather than focus solely on Southern Jim Crow, Riddick indicted racism throughout the United States. And rather than reflect a narrow conception of the Cold War civil rights nexus, the conversation turned to a more sweeping

²⁸ Harris Wofford, *Lohia and America Meet* (Mt. Rainer, MD, 1951), 13, 17–18, 27; Recording of United Nations Workshop at the Highlander Folk School, 2 Aug. 1954, Highlander Folk School Audio Collection, 8a, Tennessee State Library and Archive (hereafter HSF-TSLA). Also see Nico Slate, *Colored Cosmopolitanism: The Shared Struggle for Freedom in the United States and India* (Cambridge, MA, 2012).

vision of solidarity. One of the workshop participants declared that ‘the next social order will be controlled by the darker peoples of the world’. Riddick responded by citing the Biblical verse, ‘Ethiopia shall stretch forth its hand’, while rejecting all forms of racism. When a workshop participant asked if ‘black supremacy’ was ‘inevitable’, Riddick replied that his goal was a world without any kind of racial supremacy. ‘We don’t have to exchange one form of tyranny for another’, he stated.²⁹

From Rammanohar Lohia’s visit in 1951 to Reverend Riddick’s workshop in 1960, a connection to anti-colonial struggles persisted at Highlander throughout the 1950s. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the photo of King at Highlander would be used to attack the folk school, King himself, and the civil rights movement. Yet, as the next section of this article argues, Highlander’s strong ties with civil rights leaders and organizations — especially the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) — allowed the school to survive even after its charter was revoked and its property was confiscated. In return, Highlander served as a bastion of radical ideas and solidarities, connecting a new generation of civil rights activists to the legacies of the Left.³⁰

III

‘YOU CAN’T PADLOCK AN IDEA’

In May 1960, Highlander hosted a workshop for student activists from Nashville, many of whom were veterans of the sit-ins that had swept the South earlier that year. One workshop participant declared that it was ‘urgent for America’s sake’ that Jim Crow be destroyed so as ‘to win the minds and hearts of the people, the uncommitted people of the world’. Otherwise, ‘Russia or somebody else’ would ‘win the commitments’ of ‘all

²⁹ ‘Report on the Civil Rights Act of 1960 and Training of Citizenship School Teachers, 1960’, 515A/48, Highlander Folk School Audio Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society.

³⁰ Jeanne Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* (Boston, 2013), 35–43; Septima Poinsette Clark and Cynthia Stokes Brown, *Ready from Within: Septima Clark and the Civil Rights Movement* (Navarro, CA, 1986), 17–18 and 32–4; Parks interview by Cynthia Stokes Brown, Nov. 1980, published in *Southern Exposure* (Spring 1981), 7 and excerpted in Pete Seeger and Bob Reiser, *Everybody Says Freedom: A History of the Civil Rights Movement in Songs and Pictures* (New York, 1989), 25.

the people'. Anne Braden, the veteran civil rights activist and champion of free speech, agreed that presenting Jim Crow as a Cold War liability was 'valid and rational'. 'But I have a great distaste', she added, 'for the extent to which the improvement in negro white relations in this country gets argued for' as if 'it were a tactic of the cold war'. She found such an argument 'very distasteful', and for good reason. She and her husband, Carl, had long been branded as 'subversives' because of their commitment to racial integration. The following year, Carl Braden would be sentenced to a year in jail after he refused to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC).³¹

In 1963, Anne Braden published a booklet that attacked HUAC as a 'Bulwark of Segregation', and thus positioned the civil rights struggle alongside the cause of civil liberties in opposition to anti-communist repression. One of the case studies in the book was the anti-communist campaign against Highlander, a campaign that by 1963 had yielded devastating consequences for the school. Braden analysed the infamous photograph of King at Highlander. The claim that Highlander was a 'Communist training school' had been discredited, she argued, yet 'the truth . . . never caught up with the lie'. In this section of the article, I argue that the anti-communist lies directed at Highlander in the late 1950s and early 1960s proved more harmful than earlier waves of repression because Highlander's liberal supporters were less powerful and less committed to transformational social change. Yet Highlander was able to survive and to continue fostering a space in which a new generation of civil rights activists could, with help from veteran activists like Anne Braden, embrace several of the radical ideas that had been at the core of the 'Southern United Front'.³²

The broadside produced by the Georgia Education Commission was an effort to deploy two markers of truth: the written word and the image. Highlander fought back not just with its workshops but also using print and other media. The

³¹ 'The White Southerner in the Current Struggle', Recording of a Workshop at the Highlander Folk School, 26 May 1960, Highlander Folk School Audio Collection, 40e, HSF-TSLA; Catherine Fosl, *Subversive Southerner: Anne Braden and the Struggle for Racial Justice in the Cold War South* (New York, 2002).

³² Anne Braden, *House Un-American Activities Committee: Bulwark of Segregation* (Los Angeles, 1963), 18 and 27.

historian Virginia Reinburg, examining records of miracles in early modern France, has argued that the ‘key to believability was an archive: a written, legally established and orderly record’. Both Highlander and its opponents built and deployed such archives. They also turned to the power of recognized authorities. Myles Horton secured a letter of support signed by Reinhold Niebuhr, Eleanor Roosevelt, Reverend John O’Grady of the National Conference of Catholic Charities, and Lloyd K. Garrison, the former dean of the University of Wisconsin Law School. Published in the *New York Times*, the letter accused the Governor of Georgia of ‘irresponsible demagoguery’ and defended Highlander’s efforts to advance American democracy. Fourteen faculty members at the University of the South in Sewanee also released a statement defending the school. And the African American press was especially supportive. Trezzvant Anderson, a reporter for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, attacked the anti-Highlander broadside as ‘a typical example of the “innuendo” tactics with which the agency attempts to inflame the minds of gullible whites that there is a huge Communist plot afoot in Dixie to upset race relations’.³³

While Highlander turned to its supporters and garnered the backing of the African American press, the Georgia Education Commission enlisted the help of Southern newspapers including ‘moderate’ papers like the *Atlanta Constitution*, which launched a multi-part series on Highlander. The *Constitution* made some efforts to provide balance in its coverage, but its reporting contributed to the growing association between Highlander and communism. Consider an article entitled, ‘Highlander Director Says School Not Communist, but in Same Field’. Although readers were told that Myles Horton ‘hotly denies that he or the school has ever had any connection with communism’, the title made it seem as if he had admitted to just such a connection.³⁴ Meanwhile, Edwin Friend, the photographer who took the photo of King at Highlander, was paid to travel to Cincinnati where he lied to a Highlander supporter in order to gain video

³³ Virginia Reinburg, ‘Archives, Eyewitnesses and Rumours: Writing about Shrines in Early Modern France’, *Past and Present*, no. 230 (Nov. 2016); Glen, *Highlander*, 220; Trezzvant W. Anderson, ‘Georgia Education Commission Called Most Vicious Dixie Group: First in a Series’, *Pittsburgh Courier*, 28 Dec. 1957.

³⁴ Jack Nelson, ‘Highlander Director Says School Not Communist, but in Same Field’, *Atlanta Journal and the Atlanta Constitution*, 15 Dec. 1957.

footage of the anniversary celebration. The Georgia Education Commission continued to produce more pamphlets linking Highlander, communism, and the civil rights movement. The John Birch Society turned the image of King at Highlander into a postcard. And the original broadside was distributed to members of the Tennessee legislature who then voted to authorize an official committee to investigate Highlander.³⁵

That committee convened a series of hearings in February and March 1959. The first were held in Tracy City, a small mountain town not far from the Highlander campus. Segregationist representatives such as Harry Lee Senter attempted to use the proceedings to burnish their anti-communist and anti-integrationist reputations. But the star of the proceedings was May Justus, a children's book author and former teacher who had long been one of Highlander's most prominent local supporters. According to the *Nashville Tennessean*, 'The sharp-spoken former public school teacher matched wits with every member of the committee'. Justus was shown one of Ed Friend's photos that had been featured in the broadside — an image of a Black man and a white woman dancing — and was asked if she approved of the image. 'I see nothing immoral about it', she replied. 'It's a square dance. I can look at television any time and see worse than that'. Her inquisitor then asked, 'Don't you know it's against the law for whites and colored to marry in Tennessee?' 'Yes, sir', Justus replied, 'but I didn't know that a square dance was part of a marriage ceremony'. In her replies, Justice demonstrated the power of humour to dismantle lies. Rather than waste her breath denouncing the anti-communist attacks upon Highlander, Justus mocked them.³⁶

The second public hearing occurred in Nashville's War Memorial auditorium, a massive hall situated next to the Tennessee State Capitol. Some two hundred people gathered to watch Myles Horton spend over four hours on the stand. When

³⁵ Judith A. Bechtel and Robert M. Coughlin, *Building the Beloved Community: Maurice McCrackin's Life for Peace and Civil Rights* (Philadelphia, 1992), chap. 6, available at <<https://www.nku.edu/~bechtel/chapter6.pdf>> (accessed 23 Feb. 2022); Glen, *Highlander*, 219–20.

³⁶ John Egerton, 'The Trial of the Highlander Folk School', *Southern Exposure*, vi (1978); 'Probers' Queries Backfire Often', *Nashville Tennessean*, 7 Feb. 1959 in Box 31, John Egerton Papers, *The Trial of Highlander* (1978) — Research and Background Materials — Articles (Newspaper Articles about the Trial), Vanderbilt University Archives.

Harry Lee Senter asked if Horton was ‘a believer in the Marxist-Lenin ideology’, Horton replied, ‘No, sir. I believe in education’. In that brief exchange, Horton positioned his view of education as inherently democratic — in opposition to the tactics of Highlander’s enemies. It was ironic that anti-communist witch hunts took on the form of quasi-judicial proceedings, given that didactic trials were popular in the Communist world. As in the Soviet Union, the occasion was staged to demonstrate not just the wrongdoing of the accused but the power and grandeur of the state. But following the same tactic as May Justus, Horton used humour to undermine the necessity and legitimacy of the proceedings. When Senter asked if Horton’s wife was a member of the Communist Party, Horton answered, ‘No, sir, not to my knowledge, and I would have known’.³⁷

Highlander won the battle of wits, but the state replied with force. On the last day of July 1959, a group of some forty people, thirteen of them young people from Montgomery, were watching a documentary called ‘The Face of the South’ when policemen rushed into Highlander’s main building. One of the police officers pulled the cord to the projector and the room was pitched into darkness. One of the young people began to sing and the room swelled with the song that had become a civil rights anthem: *We Shall Overcome*. For the first time, one of the young people added a new verse, ‘We are not afraid! We are not afraid!’ The history of *We Shall Overcome* reveals the cultural dimensions of Highlander’s efforts to advance civil rights unionism. The song had been brought to Highlander in 1946 by tobacco workers fresh from a racially integrated strike in Charleston, South Carolina. Zilphia Horton, an accomplished musician who directed Highlander’s cultural programming, revised the song and taught it to Pete Seeger and Guy Carawan, who in turn helped popularize the new version. But even while Highlander created space for such cultural forms of struggle to be reimagined and repurposed, the raid on Highlander demonstrated the power of state repression.³⁸

³⁷ Egerton, ‘Trial of the Highlander Folk School’; Adams with Horton, *Unearthing Seeds of Fire*, 128–9; Garry Fullerton, ‘Bennett Charge’, *Nashville Tennessean*, undated, in Box 31, John Egerton Papers, The Trial of Highlander (1978) — Research and Background Materials — Articles (Newspaper Articles about the Trial), Vanderbilt University Archives.

³⁸ Kim Ruehl, *A Singing Army: Zilphia Horton and the Highlander Folk School* (Austin, 2021), 147–54.

Myles Horton was on his way to a conference in Europe, and the police instead arrested Septima Clark, the African American educator who had become, as Highlander's director of workshops, the most influential leader connecting the folk school to the broader freedom struggle. Highlander's liberal allies rallied in support. An article in *The Nation* stated that 'the school has been called subversive, immoral and conducive to riotous behavior; it has not been accused of practicing and advocating racial integration, though that it does so is what really riles its neighbors'. The National Conference of Methodist Youth, based in Nashville, published a pamphlet in support of the school. And Eleanor Roosevelt wrote that 'this is another case where outrageous accusations are being made simply because you are an integrated school'. But Roosevelt was not as powerful as she had been as First Lady. And while radical unions remained supportive of Highlander, the conservative turn of the CIO deprived Highlander of one of its key allies.³⁹

On 6 October 1961, Myles Horton sent a confidential letter to some three hundred 'friends of Highlander'. If the United States Supreme Court refused to intervene, Horton explained, the state of Tennessee would rescind the school's charter and confiscate its land and buildings. 'As far as the real estate is concerned', Horton predicted, 'the old Highlander will be a thing of the past, but the real Highlander and the Highlander idea will stay alive'. Horton had already secured a new charter for the 'Highlander Research and Education Center', and planned to continue the workshops and other core activities of Highlander in a new location. 'We believe that the best answer to the segregationists and reactionaries who demand the closing of the old school is not further litigation nor prolonged recriminations', he wrote, 'but rather action on a significant and vital program'. Thus, Horton argued that Highlander's resources were more influential when directed toward its workshops rather than confronting the lies of its racist opponents. In September 1961, the school's main building was padlocked, its charter was revoked, and its property (including Horton's home) was confiscated. But Highlander would survive. A new charter was secured, and Highlander returned to operating workshops — first at a

³⁹ *The Nation*, 3 Oct. 1959; 'The Trouble at Highlander', *Special Issue of Concern: A Biweekly Journal of Social and Political Comment* (23 Oct. 1959) published by the National Conference of Methodist Youth, Nashville.

temporary location in Knoxville and later at a new building in the hills outside Knoxville. As Horton declared, ‘You can padlock a building, but you can’t padlock an idea. Highlander is an idea . . . You can’t kill it and you can’t close it’.⁴⁰

The idea of Highlander, that ‘ordinary’ citizens can be empowered to become agents of positive social change, was at the core of the radical civil rights movement. And it is that idea that explains how the movement saved Highlander itself. Consider again the impact of that 1959 raid. While Highlander’s liberal supporters failed to prevent the closure of the school, several civil rights activists responded in ways that revealed how even the raid itself could be turned into a victory for the school and its approach to education. A month after the raid, Rosa Parks wrote to Septima Clark that she wanted ‘to do whatever I can’, and explained that she wanted to start a local group to support Highlander. ‘It seems so hopeless at times’, Parks wrote, ‘but with so many taking a stand, something will have to happen’. Reverend Solomon S. Seay, the executive secretary of the Montgomery Improvement Association, later told Clark, ‘That raid did more educating of my Montgomery people than I could have done in ten years. This experience taught them the kind of things they’ll be up against all their lives, how to meet injustice and to learn and profit from it’. Mrs Alleen Brewer, an African American teacher on Edisto Island, South Carolina, was present during the raid and later wrote, ‘I wouldn’t take anything for the experience last week. I learned a lot. In many ways Right and Justice are on trial, but we need not fear — they will win’.⁴¹

Brewer taught in one of Highlander’s most impactful initiatives — the citizenship schools. The history of those schools demonstrates how strong ties to the civil rights movement protected Highlander’s legacy even after it lost its property and was forced to relocate. The first citizenship school opened on Johns Island, South Carolina in 1957. Designed to help African American adults learn to read in order to pass voter registration

⁴⁰ Egerton, ‘Trial of the Highlander Folk School’; Myles Horton, ‘Confidential Memo to 300 Friends of Highlander’, 6 Oct. 1961, Folder 10, Box 16, HSF-TSLA; Aimee Isrig Horton, *The Highlander Folk School: A History of its Major Programs, 1932–1961* (Brooklyn 1989), 294.

⁴¹ Highlander Reports, 27th Annual Report, 1 Oct. 1958–30 Sept. 1959, Folder 12, Box 14, HFS-TSLA; Septima Poinsette Clark, *Echo in My Soul* (New York, 1962), 208; Charron, *Freedom’s Teacher*, 268–9; Glen, *Highlander*, 222; Theoharis, *Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks*, 148.

tests, the citizenship schools became important recruiting centres for the civil rights movement. Septima Clark played a key role in the schools from their inception, as did one of her former students, a dynamic local activist named Esau Jenkins. Clark and Jenkins worked with Myles Horton to design, fund and expand the schools. By 1965, Clark estimated that the citizenship schools had enrolled more than 25,000 people and led to at least double that number of registered voters. It would have been impossible for the programme to grow that quickly solely under the aegis of Highlander — especially given the steep cost of the battles Highlander was forced to wage just to remain open and the additional costs involved in relocating. Clark and Horton managed to save the citizenship schools by transferring their management to the SCLC. Clark moved with them and continued to oversee the schools as a staff member of the SCLC.⁴²

Clark remained committed to Highlander and to its radical vision for the movement. In 1963, she wrote to Myles Horton a remarkable letter reflecting on ‘how to organize a community with the help of the people in the community’, ‘how to reach the power structure’, and how to gain ‘true equality [and] true freedom for all men’. In addition to establishing ‘working relations with labor and liberals’, Clark wrote of the movement, ‘We need to think about taxes, social welfare programs, labor management relations, schools, and old age pensions’. In keeping with the spirit of Highlander, Clark matched such sweeping goals with a profoundly democratic and egalitarian vision of grassroots struggle. The movement had to cultivate local leaders, she told Horton. True social change could not be about ‘one man planning and telling’. Clark’s comment gestured towards the leader of the SCLC, Martin Luther King, whose charismatic leadership contrasted with the philosophy of Highlander. Yet the fact that King embraced Clark and the citizenship schools reveals, as his speech at Highlander in 1957

⁴² ‘Southern Christian Leadership Conference Citizenship Education Program’, Folder 10, Box 22, Schwarzhaupt Foundation Papers, University of Chicago; Deanna M. Gillespie, ‘“First-Class” Citizenship Education in the Mississippi Delta, 1961–1965’, *Journal of Southern History*, lxxx (2014); David P. Levine, ‘The Birth of the Citizenship Schools: Entwining the Struggles for Literacy and Freedom’, *History of Education Quarterly*, xlv (2004).

made clear, that King respected Highlander's belief in the power of grassroots social change.⁴³

A few months before Clark wrote to Horton, in July 1963, the infamous photo of King at Highlander was again deployed to link the civil rights struggle to communism. This time, it was Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett who displayed the photo while telling the Senate Commerce Committee that civil rights legislation was 'a part of the world Communist conspiracy to divide and conquer our country from within'. Several liberal senators and congressmen disputed the depiction of Highlander as a Communist school, and asked the FBI to investigate. In an internal memo, the director of domestic intelligence for the FBI wrote that Highlander had 'continuously been involved in the integration movement and as a result charges are being continuously made that it is "communist". These charges are based mainly on the opinion of individuals making the charges that being prointegration is being procommunist'.⁴⁴ Although the FBI had for decades reached the same conclusion — that Highlander was not a Communist institution — it would be a mistake to credit the Bureau with derailing the claims of the segregationists. For one thing, the Bureau never publicly vindicated Highlander. Furthermore, as is now widely known, the FBI would use anti-communism as an excuse to surveil and harass King and several other radical African American activists. In April 1965, J. Edgar Hoover wrote to the FBI offices in Atlanta and Knoxville that 'nationwide publicity has been given to a photograph of subject King purportedly taken at the Highlander Folk School'. In a telling note at the bottom of the letter, Hoover added, 'If we can obtain information disproving

⁴³ Clark to Horton, 24 Sept. 1963, Box 9, Folder 12, Highlander Folk School Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁴⁴ Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting 'til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York, 2006); Kenneth O'Reilly, *Racial Matters: The FBI's Secret File on Black America, 1960–1972* (New York, 1989). Also see 'Final Report of the Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with respect to Intelligence Activities', United States Senate, 94th Congress, 2nd Session, Report No. 94-755, 23 Apr. 1976, 98; Warren G. Magnuson to Hoover, 16 July 1963 and Mr. W. C. Sullivan to Mr. F. J. Baumgardner, 26 July 1963, in 'Highlander Folk School Part 16 of 19', pp. 32–3 and 43–4, FBI Records: The Vault, <<https://vault.fbi.gov/Highlander%20Folk%20School/Highlander%20Folk%20School%20Part%2016%20of%2019/view>> (accessed 23 Feb. 2022).

King's claim which he recently made before "Meet the Press", we would have some counter-intelligence possibility'.⁴⁵

Civil rights activists continued to fight back against the lies of figures like Ross Barnett, as well as the 'dirty tricks' of Hoover and the FBI — and Highlander continued to offer a space in which those activists could reimagine their struggles. In March 1965, Highlander hosted a two-week 'freedom school workshop' that brought together some forty people, African American and white, to talk about the ongoing struggle in Mississippi. The workshop included a range of SNCC veterans including Prathia Hall, Bob Moses, Mary Varela, Jane Stembridge and Charlie Cobb. Participants learned how to make audio tapes they could use to help communicate new ideas. They heard the historian John Hope Franklin give a lecture on 'The Civil Rights Revolution in Historical Perspective'. And they talked with each other about their achievements and setbacks. Like many of Highlander's workshops, part of the goal was to help participants recognize what they already knew. According to Dorothy Mae Rodgers from Rosedale, Mississippi, the workshop 'made me to know that I can know what I can do when I go back home'. Several participants expressed the desire to share such self-knowledge with others. Beulah Mae Ayers of Holly Spring wrote, 'I can go home with a vivid mind of how to set up a Freedom School and what should be taught in the school'. Importantly, it was not a particular curriculum that Ayers gained at the workshop, but the confidence to believe in her own knowledge and abilities. For Eleanor Aragon, the real benefit of the workshop was not 'learning specifics' but 'being in a house with people I loved and I could talk and not be afraid'. This echoed what Rosa Parks had gained at Highlander some ten years earlier — the experience of living in an inclusive, racially integrated community.⁴⁶

A few weeks earlier, while participating in the Selma to Montgomery March, Myles Horton had the peculiar experience

⁴⁵ From Hoover to SACs in Atlanta and Knoxville, 6 Apr. 1965 and SAC, Knoxville to Hoover, 14 Apr. 1965, in 'Highlander Folk School Part 17 of 19', pp. 11–12 and 17, FBI Records: The Vault, <<https://vault.fbi.gov/Highlander%20Folk%20School/Highlander%20Folk%20School%20Part%2017%20of%2019/vi ew>> (accessed 23 Feb. 2022).

⁴⁶ 'Freedom Workshop News', published at Highlander in April 1965, 'Highlander Folk School, 1957–1975', Folder 17, Box 2, Rosa Parks Papers, UP000775_002_017, Wayne State University.

of walking past one of the billboards showing him seated next to ‘Martin Luther King at a Communist Training School’. It had been eight years since that photo had been taken, and four years since Highlander’s charter had been revoked and its land confiscated. Horton was still fighting the racial order that the billboard was meant to defend and, in a surprising way, the billboard itself created a small opportunity for him to transcend the colour line. Horton had tried to start a conversation with an elderly African American marcher but had achieved little success until the two men walked past the billboard and an opportunity arose to break the silence. ‘My marching companion recognized my picture’, Horton later recalled, ‘and that of Mrs. Rosa Parks, whom he had known before she came to Highlander’. It was only then, as a result of that double recognition, that the older Black man told Horton ‘that he joined the march to finish the freedom walk he started ten years ago during the bus boycott’. Thus, an image that was deployed to maintain white supremacy connected two men across the racial divide in a shared commitment to freedom and equality.⁴⁷

Such a connection might seem inconsequential had not the march itself also countered the narrative of that billboard — not by refuting the myth of communist influence, but by redirecting attention towards the basic truth that African Americans were willing to risk their lives for the right to vote. One could argue that every sit-in, protest march and freedom ride was an act of truth-telling. As the political theorist Brandon M. Terry has written, ‘If illegibility is often characteristic of injustice, part of what protest must entail is the disclosure of things otherwise unseen’.⁴⁸ Consider again the education of Highlander’s most famous student: Rosa Parks. Fittingly, Parks was one of the featured speakers at the conclusion of the Selma to Montgomery March. She noted that ‘through the compliments of someone’ the marchers had been ‘showered’ with ‘leaflets about the Communist school, that particular school where they accused Dr. King of being a student’. Parks set the record straight. ‘He was not a student’, she said of King, ‘but I was, and that particular school, Myles Horton, is responsible for me today not hating every white person I see. I learned at that time and at that

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Brandon M. Terry, ‘After Ferguson’, *The Point*, x, 16 June 2015, <<https://thepointmag.com/2015/politics/after-ferguson>> (accessed 23 Feb. 2022).

place that there are decent people of every race and colour. We are not in a struggle of black against white, but wrong and right, right against wrong'. Parks did not waste time answering the charge that Highlander was a Communist institution. Rather, she focused on what she had learned from the school. Thus, she demonstrated one of the most successful responses to propaganda — refusing to cede the narrative — while testifying to the lasting power of the inclusive and egalitarian community Highlander had long cultivated.⁴⁹

IV

CONCLUSION

In his speech at Highlander in 1957, Martin Luther King suggested that knowledge was the key to cutting through the fear and hatred that undergirded American racism. He explained, 'Men hate each other because they fear each other; they fear each other because they don't know each other; they don't know each other because they can't communicate with each other; they can't communicate with each other because they are separated from each other'. By bringing people together across the colour line, King argued, Highlander was providing the kind of education that would roll back ignorance, fear and ultimately hatred. He closed with one of his most renowned statements: 'The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice'. The abolitionist minister, Theodore Parker, had used a variant of those words as early as 1853. King would reuse them repeatedly in a variety of speeches, and a version of that sentence would be published the following year. At Highlander, King followed the metaphor of the bending arc with three quotations that linked justice to truth. Yet King's presence at Highlander would be distorted into a weaponized untruth that would prove difficult to combat. Did the persistent power of white supremacist propaganda suggest that the moral arc of the universe did not in fact bend towards justice? King never suggested that justice would win regardless of human action.

⁴⁹ Rosa Parks, 'Speech at the Alabama Freedom March', 25 Mar. 1965, available at <<https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2017/03/21/speech-at-the-alabama-freedom-march-march-25-1965/>> (accessed 23 Feb. 2022). Also see Cailin O'Connor and James Owen Weatherall, *The Misinformation Age: How False Beliefs Spread* (New Haven, 2020); Joseph E. Uscinski (ed.), *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them* (Oxford, 2018).

Nor did he suggest that merely stating the truth would be enough to guarantee its victory. He fought to build a society in which the truth would flourish, aware — as the evolving history of that photo of him at Highlander makes clear — that those who would fight for the truth must also fight for a just and democratic society.⁵⁰

The civil rights movement was, like most social movements, a battle over the truth. The idea that King was controlled by Communists was but one lie in the pantheon of falsehoods that shaped American racism. A short list might include the myth that African Americans were ‘happy’ with segregation; that civil rights protests were the work of ‘outside agitators’; that Black men were desperate to have sex with white women; and that Black people were not as intelligent as white people and were prone to violence and crime. In the North and West, one especially popular fiction was that the ‘Negro problem’ was confined to the South. While scholars have examined the importance to white supremacy of lies, myths and other sundry falsehoods, how civil rights activists fought against such falsehoods remains understudied. A variety of counter-propaganda techniques were deployed to unmask the lies that defined American racism. Not all of those techniques were equally effective, as the history of that photo of King at Highlander reveals.⁵¹

King was aware of the dangers of trying to debunk the lies surrounding his visit to Highlander. ‘I haven’t done anything but give a speech there’, he told one interviewer, ‘but the minute I go to arguing about I wasn’t “trained” there, it looks like I’m trying to say there’s something wrong with the school’. King refused to disown the school, just as he refused to walk away from his long-time supporter, Stanley Levison, or from the many other civil rights figures who had been tarnished as subversive. In part, this was a result of his recognition that the movement depended on a broad range of allies, and that many of the most creative and

⁵⁰ King, ‘Look to the Future’; Martin Luther King Jr, ‘Out of the Long Night’, *Gospel Messenger*, 8 Feb. 1958, 3–4 and 13–15; Theodore Parker, ‘Of Justice and the Conscience’, in *Ten Sermons of Religion* (Boston, 1853), 84–5.

⁵¹ Sian Zelbo, ‘E. J. Edmunds, School Integration, and White Supremacist Backlash in Reconstruction New Orleans’, *History of Education Quarterly*, lix (2019); Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Lies that Bind: Rethinking Identity* (New York, 2018), 105–34; Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York, 2016).

influential civil rights leaders had deep roots and strong connections across the American Left.⁵² Consider the political trajectories of four of the most influential civil rights activists: A. Philip Randolph (whose civil rights unionism, as we have seen, played a role in the Montgomery Bus Boycott via the work of E. D. Nixon); Bayard Rustin (whose early ties to the Party were used against him but who remained a strong advocate of ties with organized labour); Pauli Murray (who was briefly a Party member and later worked for the socialist Worker's Defense League); and Ella Baker (whose connections spanned the American Left, including Highlander, where she helped mentor a new generation of activists). As King knew well, Highlander was only one of several bridges between the movement and the broader legacies of the American Left.⁵³

King's commitment to Highlander stemmed from his respect for the influence of the Left on the movement. But King's fidelity to the folk school also resulted from his own commitment to economic justice. King was not troubled by the civil rights unionism he encountered at Highlander because he had long been dedicated to attacking poverty and inequality as well as racism. He envisioned a fundamental transformation of American society. Consider the plans for a Poor People's Campaign that he had helped to develop at the time of his assassination in Memphis in 1968, as well as his decision to travel to Memphis to support striking sanitation workers. In his

⁵² While discussing the dangers of his 'charismatic leadership', many histories of the civil rights movement acknowledge King's role as a mediator and coalition builder. See Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years, 1963–65* (New York, 1998), 189; Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens, GA, 1987); Clayborne Carson, 'Martin Luther King, Jr.: Charismatic Leadership in a Mass Struggle', *Journal of American History*, lxxiv (1987).

⁵³ Cornelius L. Bynum, *A. Philip Randolph and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Urbana, IL, 2010); Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color*; Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill, 2003); Jake Hodder, 'Toward a Geography of Black Internationalism: Bayard Rustin, Nonviolence, and the Promise of Africa', *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, cvi (2016); John D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin* (New York, 2003); Daniel Levine, *Bayard Rustin and the Civil Rights Movement* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2000); Jervis Anderson, *Bayard Rustin: Troubles I've Seen. A Biography* (New York, 1997); Rosalind Rosenberg, *Jane Crow: The Life of Pauli Murray* (Oxford, 2017); Patricia Bell-Scott, *The Firebrand and the First Lady: Portrait of a Friendship. Pauli Murray, Eleanor Roosevelt, and the Struggle for Social Justice* (New York, 2016).

life and his death, King embodied the promise of what we might call the ‘long Popular Front’.⁵⁴

In this article, I have avoided framing the legacies of struggle that Highlander and King both helped to advance as a ‘long Popular Front’ or a ‘long United Front’. For one thing, no one at Highlander or in the civil rights movement used such phrases to describe their efforts. Furthermore, there were important differences between the ‘Southern United Front’ that Highlander’s leaders helped organize in the 1930s and the work of the school in the 1950s and 1960s. Perhaps the biggest difference concerns the role of Communists. Whereas the Party was vital to the Popular Front of the 1930s, active CP members played no significant role in Highlander’s efforts during the ‘classical phase’ of the civil rights movement. Socialists of many sorts abounded, as did a range of activists who, like the African American beauticians Highlander hosted in 1961, were less inclined to link Jim Crow to critiques of capitalism. While tracing Highlander’s contributions to what I am calling the ‘radical civil rights movement’, I do not wish to understate the political and ideological diversity of the movement. On the contrary, ideological inclusivity was one of the pillars of the ‘Popular Front’ that Highlander maintained and helped communicate to a new generation of activists. I have argued that Highlander cultivated certain long-standing socialist commitments — commitments to strong unions and economic justice, in particular, and to an expansive geography of struggle that extended to the North and included anti-colonial solidarities abroad. But ultimately more central to Highlander’s contributions to the radical civil rights movement — and to what made the movement ‘radical’ — was the folk school’s approach to grassroots social change.⁵⁵

Another danger of deploying a ‘long movement’ narrative — whether the ‘long Popular Front’ or the ‘long civil rights movement’ — is the risk of overlooking tensions, fractures and discontinuities within the movement. I have argued against scholars who suggest that the Cold War permanently constrained the goals and methods of the civil rights movement.

⁵⁴ Thomas F. Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice* (Philadelphia, 2006); Vincent Harding, *Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero*, revised edn (Maryknoll, NY, 2008).

⁵⁵ ‘Beauticians’ Workshop on Civil Rights’, 15 Jan. 1961, Highlander Folk School Audio Collection, 47a, HFS-TSLA.

Yet it would be a mistake to underestimate the profound harm caused by anti-communist repression. That is why the story of Highlander's successes must be told alongside the story of its losses. To ignore those losses would be to ignore the tremendous obstacles facing the radical civil rights movement — as well as the troubling fact that just as Highlander's egalitarian legacy survived Cold War America, so did its opposite. In March 2019, Highlander's main building was burned to the ground. While the origin of the fire remains unclear, a white supremacist symbol was found painted nearby.⁵⁶

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⁵⁶ “‘White Power’ Symbol Was Found at Site of Fire, Civil Rights Center Says”, *New York Times*, 3 Apr. 2019.

ABSTRACT

In the spring of 1965, hundreds of billboards arose across the American South purporting to show Dr Martin Luther King Jr at a 'Communist training school'. By tracing the history of that infamous image, this article examines how civil rights activists fought against racist propaganda, and argues that the legacies of the American Left remained vital to the civil rights movement despite Cold War repression. At the centre of this story is the Highlander Folk School, an integrated institution in the hills of Tennessee, at which the photo was taken. Highlander's democratic approach to education created a space in which Leftist ideas and strategies could coalesce, a space that stood in sharp contrast to both the fantasy of a 'Communist training school' and the anti-communist segregationists who propagated that fantasy. Both in the content of its workshops and the manner in which they were organized, Highlander preserved the heritage of the American Left in ways that help to explain how many civil rights activists came to reject Communism *and* the Red Scare, to embrace civil liberties *and* economic justice, and to respect local traditions of African American resistance *and* expansive anti-colonial solidarities.