

“I AM A UNION WOMAN”: GENDER, CLASS, AND FOLK MUSIC IN THE HARLAN
COUNTY WAR AND BEYOND

A thesis presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of
Western Carolina University in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in History

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March 2021

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

UMWA	United Mine Workers of America
NMU	National Miners Union
AFL.....	American Federation of Labor
CIO	Congress of Industrial Organizations
IWW	Industrial Workers of the World

ABSTRACT

“I AM A UNION WOMAN”: GENDER, CLASS, AND FOLK MUSIC IN THE HARLAN COUNTY WAR AND BEYOND

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The onset of the Great Depression led to severe work shortages for miners in Harlan County, Kentucky. In turn, low wages exacerbated by shorter hours created starvation conditions for their families. In 1931, organizers from the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) travelled to Harlan County to unionize miners. While it succeeded in organizing thousands of miners, it failed to complete a bargaining agreement with Harlan County’s coal operators. The union abandoned its efforts after less than a year. Throughout 1931, violence sprouted between miners who supported unionization efforts and the armed guards and sheriff’s deputies hired by their employers. Following the UMWA’s withdrawal from Harlan County, the National Miners’ Union (NMU), a Communist Party-supported union came to Harlan County with a more radical vision than that offered by its predecessor. The violence that characterized Harlan County during this period became known as the Harlan County War. This thesis will address the Harlan County War from the perspective of three women who wrote and performed songs intended to organize and encourage striking miners. By examining the words and experiences of Mary “Aunt Molly” Jackson, her half-sister, Sarah Ogan Gunning, and Florence Reece, this thesis will address the impact of folk music on efforts to organize workers. Additionally, Jackson, Gunning, and Reece all addressed the violence and exploitation they witnessed from a gendered perspective. Their

lyrics reflected an inclusive understanding of working-class organization, even as they worked to organize laborers in an industry that excluded women. By analyzing their words and those of their contemporaries, the content of their lyrics, and newspaper reports of their actions during and after the Harlan County War, this thesis will address women's activism in Appalachia, the meaning of working-class identity, and the efficacy of music as an element of social movements.

INTRODUCTION

The 1930s brought a violent end to one of the most famous chapters in American labor history. For decades, coal miners in Appalachia had battled coal operators over the right to form and join labor unions and bargain for improved working conditions. As the Great Depression deepened in 1930 and 1931, violence broke out across the Central Appalachian coalfields. Most famously, fighting erupted in Harlan County, Kentucky in 1931 after local miners attempted to join the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA). The UMWA, unable to provide support for a lengthy strike, ended its backing of the miners after a four-month campaign, and some turned instead to the Communist Party-backed National Miners Union (NMU). The NMU's involvement in the Harlan County War, which began in 1931 and continued intermittently throughout the 1930s, included the outspoken activism of three women key to the movement to unionize eastern Kentucky coal miners. Each woman worked to organize laborers through folk music. Music offered workers a collective opportunity to express solidarity and protest decisions made by their employers, and it reminded miners and their families that they could only better their lives through collective action. By retooling old melodies with new lyrics, songwriters also crafted links to the past that drew on cultural strength to protest the actions of the coal industry.

First, Aunt Molly Jackson, around fifty years old when the Harlan County War began, worked as a midwife and had several family members who toiled in the mines. As a midwife, she had witnessed the suffering inflicted upon Harlan County families by frequent accidents in the mines, as well as the poverty and starvation stemming from the wage and hour cuts caused by the sharp decrease in demand for coal in the wake of the Great Depression. She joined strikers on the picket lines and faced violence from armed guards hired by coal companies to intimidate striking workers, but she became most famous for penning songs that reflected workers' opposition to

their employers. Her songs offered workers and their families collective experiences that enhanced solidarity on the picket lines and unified miners in their anger. In 1931, Jackson traveled north to New York City, where she took part in the growing left-wing folk music scene. Jackson's experiences demonstrated the nuances of protest during the Great Depression. As a woman born and raised in eastern Kentucky, she thoroughly understood miners' grievances and the effects that industrialization had on Appalachian families. Further, her alliances with members of the Communist Party, which began when the NMU entered Harlan County and continued during her time in New York, reflected her belief that capitalism was incompatible with her moral values, which emphasized solidarity, equity, and cooperative economics.

Second, Sarah Ogan Gunning, Jackson's younger half-sister, took a similar path to her sister as a pro-union singer and songwriter, but Gunning's political beliefs set the sisters apart. Although Gunning was more than two decades younger than her sister, they both experienced the ravages that the coal industry inflicted on their families, their neighbors, and themselves. Gunning lost two children during the Great Depression to malnutrition after her husband lost his job. This experience led Gunning to detest the greed and avarice that she thought coal operators personified. Like Jackson, Gunning claimed a role for herself as a union organizer. However, Gunning's role in the Harlan County War appears to have been relatively muted compared to her sister's, in part because she lived in neighboring Bell County during the worst of the fighting. Still, she contributed several noteworthy songs to the American labor movement, especially once she moved to New York City in 1935. Unlike her sister, she came to blame the operators as individuals rather than the entire capitalist economic system. She later changed the title of one of her most famous songs from "I Hate the Capitalist System" to "I Hate the Company Bosses." She also avoided association with the Communist Party after the NMU's support for atheism led

many miners to turn away from the union. Further, Gunning did not claim to have participated in violent actions like Jackson did. Although Gunning remained a staunch supporter of unionism and solidarity and an opponent of coal operators and other unscrupulous industrial leaders, the subtle differences between her and Jackson's politics demonstrates the complex nature of women's political activism, especially for women from rural, conservative backgrounds.

Finally, Florence Reece participated in and survived the Harlan County War. Reece moved with her husband, Sam, to Harlan County from Tennessee in the 1920s. While she did not have the same roots in Harlan County that Jackson or Gunning had, she and her husband became outspoken proponents of unionization during the Harlan County War. Reece is best known as the author of "Which Side Are You On?," a song that resonated with miners for its sharp condemnation of coal operators and the armed guards they hired to police company towns. She referred to the latter group of men as "gun thugs," a common term used by miners to describe their primary adversaries. She urged all miners in Harlan County to join and support the NMU, and she denigrated them as being no better than "gun thugs" if they did not. By dividing the men of Harlan County into two opposing camps, Reece drew on patriarchal conceptions of the family that required men to work and provide for their wives and children. She argued that if men refused to join the union, they neglected their duties as husbands and fathers and could be considered no better than the men who harassed and assaulted union members and their families. Like Jackson and Gunning, Reece drew on a working-class form of maternal politics to attack greed and selfishness and to urge coal miners to abandon individualistic impulses in favor of solidarity. This thesis will utilize a definition of working-class maternal politics derived from the works of scholars like Mary Triece, Temma Kaplan, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, and Jessica

Wilkerson.¹ Working-class maternal politics refers to a form of political activism in which working-class women drew on contemporary understandings of motherhood to advocate for political and economic change. Working-class women drew attention to the incongruences inherent in a system that demanded that women focus on motherhood and eschew paid labor yet did not offer the financial supports necessary to make the idealized form of motherhood possible. While middle-class women also utilized maternal politics at various moments in American history, working-class women's maternal politics differed in that it primarily focused on families' material wellbeing, rather than on moral issues. By utilizing working-class maternal politics, Reece demonstrated how women could seek political power and participation in a patriarchal system while drawing on contemporary gender norms.

By emphasizing workers' responsibilities to their families, Jackson, Gunning, and Reece did not call for a reimagining of the gendered nature of Appalachian politics or economies. They did not incorporate explicit calls for women's rights into their songs. However, by using their voices in a political manner, Jackson, Gunning, and Reece implicitly challenged a male-centered view of the working-class, even as they never attempted to change the patriarchal nature of work, family, and the home in Appalachia. The nuances and complexities of women's labor activism in the Appalachian coal wars will be the focus of this thesis. Due to the availability of evidence of women's roles in coalfield protest, this thesis will focus on the Harlan County War. This does not mean, however, that this thesis will be unable to draw conclusions relevant for Appalachia's

¹ See Temma Kaplan, "Female Consciousness and Collective Action: The Case of Barcelona, 1910-1918," *Signs* 7, no. 3, *Feminist Theory* (Spring, 1982), 545-566; Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "Disorderly Women: Gender and Labor Militancy in the Appalachian South," *The Journal of American History* 73, no. 2 (September, 1986), 354-382; Mary Triece, *On the Picket Line: Strategies of Working-Class Women During the Depression*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007; Jessica Wilkerson, *To Live Here You Have to Fight: How Women Led Appalachian Movements for Social Justice*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019.

general experiences with coal mining, protest, and violence. This thesis will address women's activist roles in an industry that explicitly forbade female participation until the 1970s, and it will discuss how women utilized gender expectations to promote solidarity and equity in the coalfields. The complexities inherent in each woman's production and dissemination of music offer intriguing insights into the meanings of women's labor activism, the contours of working-class identity, the political opportunities available to women in patriarchal societies, and the enduring power of music to unite communities and enhance protest movements. Jackson, Gunning, and Reece understood that they held multiple identities. In their songs and activism, class and gender identities intersected and contributed to an understanding of the working-class that centered reproductive labor. Jackson, Gunning, and Reece all utilized working-class maternal politics, but they each practiced their own approaches, demonstrating the variety and nuance of Appalachian women's activism. Each wrote songs that, with their multiple messages, inspired future generations of activists in various social movements. Additionally, both folk singers and performers of other forms of music recorded cover versions of their songs, while others wrote new lyrics to fit different circumstances. By doing so, subsequent generations of musicians ensured that Jackson, Gunning, and Reece influenced activists of various stripes, including many far removed from Appalachia or coal mining. Finally, each drew on traditional music to organize workers, even as their approaches did not always adhere to tradition. This thesis will analyze the intersections of class, gender, and music through the songs and experiences of Aunt Molly Jackson, Sarah Ogan Gunning, and Florence Reece to gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of Appalachian women's political activism.

This thesis will be divided into three chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter will set the scene by discussing the causes and timeline of the Harlan County War. Previous scholars

have chronicled the fighting, and this thesis does not seek to challenge their insights. However, a brief overview of the conflict will be essential to the task of understanding the meaning and significance of women's activism in the Harlan County War. Additionally, the first chapter will offer brief biographical sketches of Aunt Molly Jackson, Sarah Ogan Gunning, and Florence Reece.

Chapter two will analyze the pro-union content of Jackson's, Gunning's, and Reece's lyrics through the lens of class. All three wrote songs that encouraged miners to organize and fight for their rights as well as their families' wellbeing. An analysis of the lyrical themes of these pro-union songs will demonstrate the arguments and emotional tools available to songwriters who pursued a fully unionized mine workforce. Additionally, this chapter will place these women within their communities by analyzing how other miners and miners' wives thought about unionization. By comparing lyrical content to the stated preferences of other community members, this chapter will seek to understand how these women and their activism fit into the political and social landscape of Harlan County.

Chapter three will analyze each woman's lyrics for content that reflected gendered views of the Harlan County War, the working-class, and capitalism. All three women composed songs that condemned coal operators for the impact their decision had on women and children in Harlan County. Further, Jackson did not have her husband's support when she became involved in union activism, and Gunning's husband appeared to take an ambivalent stance on unionism. While Reece's husband strongly supported the NMU, the varied circumstances surrounding each woman's entry into the labor movement demonstrates that Appalachian woman sometimes took activist positions contrary to their husbands'. Analyzing the content of their lyrics can offer

insights into the gendered nature of Appalachian labor activism, which will in turn foster a discussion of how women found space to be activists in a patriarchal society.

Finally, the conclusion will tie these themes together by analyzing how Jackson, Gunning, and Reece wrote songs that simultaneously reflected both pro-union and gendered perspectives. Analyzing how these two themes intersected in their music will allow for a deeper understanding of how these women viewed their activism and their intersectional roles in their community.

Historiography

To examine the importance of Aunt Molly Jackson, Sarah Ogan Gunning, and Florence Reece to the production and dissemination of working-class protest music, women's activism, and community endurance and solidarity, this thesis will draw on four distinct trends in scholarly literature. First, in the aftermath of the New Left movements of the 1960s, labor historians shifted from focusing on the economic relationships between labor unions and employers to discussing working-class culture. While economic analyses of the impact of labor unions on business cycles, wages, and automation have their own merits, the decision to focus on elements of working-class culture opened the door to expansive studies of working-class religious practices, the impacts of ethnicity on organization, and the role of music in working-class identity. Second, works on the importance of female labor in a society that discouraged official paid labor for women will be essential to this thesis. While the coal industry differed from the textile industry and other industries that employed women, women in the coalfields performed the domestic labor essential to maintaining both individual households and coal town communities. In addition, they performed the reproductive labor required to reinforce the workforce of a notoriously deadly industry. Third, this thesis will specifically analyze the impact

that folk music had on union organization, worker solidarity, and community cohesiveness. Multiple scholars have addressed the roles that musicians played in organizing and inspiring workers. Especially during the Great Depression, folk singers composed songs that combined pro-labor lyrics with music often derived from older folk songs that most workers knew. Scholarly accounts of this spurt of activity will contribute to this thesis's analysis of the importance of folk music to the efforts to organize Harlan County's miners. Finally, literature on the specific circumstances of Appalachian industrialization will offer context. Industrialization and the coal wars impacted and influenced the people who lived through them, including the subjects of this thesis. Thus, an understanding of Appalachia's experiences with industrialization, especially coal mining, will be essential to this thesis's attempt to understand the impact that Appalachian women had on their communities' resistance to coal operators.

Old and New Labor History

In the 1920s and 1930s, labor history took shape as a form of economic history at the University of Wisconsin. There, economists like Selig Perlman and John Commons sought to analyze the effects that the expansion of labor unions had on such aspects of the national economy as job markets, wages, and employee turnover, among others. Although their research enhanced economists' understanding of the importance of labor unions in a maturing industrial economy, they offered little to no insight on the cultural backgrounds of the workers who belonged to unions.² In the 1960s, historians influenced by the New Left's push to understand and embrace disfranchised and marginalized people began studying working-class culture. E.P. Thompson's landmark work, *The Making of the English Working Class*, emphasized the pre-

² For examples of economic historians' ignoring workers' cultures, see John R. Commons, *Trade Unionism and Labor Problems* (Boston: Ginn and Co., 1921) and Selig Perlman, *A History of Trade Unionism in the United States* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1922).

industrial roots of working-class consciousness. Rather than treat class as something that emerged from nineteenth century conflicts between workers and their employers in factory settings, Thompson traced class consciousness to bread riots in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. He argued that participants in these events sought to preserve what he termed a moral economy, meaning that they viewed increasing bread prices and the enclosure of the commons as violations of the moral obligations each individual held in English society. Additionally, Thompson recognized the importance of cultural factors like religion to working-class people's identities, and he also demonstrated that religion could contribute to resistance efforts. *The Making of the English Working-Class* represented a seismic shift in the study of labor history, and Thompson's work encouraged generations of labor historians to consider the specific backgrounds and identities of different groups of workers.³

In the United States, Herbert Gutman laid the groundwork for subsequent American labor historians to study the impact of religion, language, and pre-industrial backgrounds on the formation of labor unions and conflicts between workers and employers. In "Protestantism and the American Labor Movement: The Christian Spirit in the Gilded Age," he admonished labor historians to consider the importance of Christian worldviews to workers' attempts to democratize their workplaces and reduce the stark inequalities prevalent in Gilded Age America. He focused on the rhetoric employed by American labor leaders, who frequently accused industrialists of forsaking the Christian ideals of brotherhood, charity, and equity that they claimed to uphold. However, he also recognized that religion could divide as much as unite workers. While workers of similar religious backgrounds could find solidarity in their shared beliefs, tensions formed when Protestants, Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and Jews found it

³ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963).

impossible to accept common cause with their doctrinal opponents. Still, the social gospel arguments employed by prominent leaders in the Knights of Labor and American Federation of Labor (AFL) gave working-class politics a rhetorical air that worked to its advantage among certain religiously inclined individuals and groups. Gutman's recognition of religion's importance to working-class organization and consciousness exemplified the historiographical shift toward analyzing the backgrounds of the people who formed America's labor unions.⁴

Gutman did not stop at examining the importance of religion to the American labor movement. In his 1973 article "Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America, 1815-1919," he argued that successive waves of immigration, which shifted from western Europe to southern and eastern Europe by the end of the nineteenth century, made the American working-class unique. Unlike the English working-class described by Thompson, the American working-class incorporated people from a variety of ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. Gutman argued that this development led to an American working-class more internally divided and balkanized than its European counterparts. Additionally, some ethnic groups proved more prone to unionization and labor militancy than others. Building on his work concerning the impact of Protestantism on the labor movement's values and goals, Gutman demonstrated that the multiethnic character of the American working-class created a labor movement with goals that differed across time and place.⁵

Building on E.P. Thompson's landmark work, Joan Scott, in *The Glassworkers of Carmaux*, analyzed the development of labor unions and working-class militancy by examining

⁴ Herbert Gutman, "Protestantism and the American Labor Movement: The Christian Spirit in the Gilded Age," *The American Historical Review* 72, No. 1 (October, 1966), 74-101.

⁵ Herbert Gutman, "Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America, 1815-1919," *The American Historical Review* 78, No. 3 (June, 1973), 531-588.

the evolution of one industry in one city over several decades. She argued that Carmaux's glassworkers turned to unionism and socialism in response to processes of automation that made their skillset increasingly obsolete in the industrial economy of late nineteenth century France. When they realized that mechanization and automation would reduce the needed workforce, glassworkers banded together to preserve their pay and status, as well as the future status they expected to bequeath to their sons. While they failed to prevent automation and the glass industry began employing more unskilled and semi-skilled workers compared to skilled workers, Carmaux's glassworkers demonstrated Thompson's point that working-class consciousness did not originate in the rhetoric espoused by left-wing intellectuals and politicians. Instead, glassworkers sought to preserve traditional relationships and processes in the workplace that guaranteed worker autonomy and prosperity.⁶

In *Glass Towns*, Ken Fones-Wolf transfers Scott's analysis to towns in northern West Virginia. Like Carmaux's glassworkers, West Virginia's ethnically diverse glassworkers turned to labor unions to preserve their conceptions of fairness, which guaranteed each worker's ability to make a good living and pass the skills of his trade and position to his male heirs. Although West Virginia's glassworkers failed to prevent automation and the state's glass industry faded after a few decades of prosperity, the diverse character of the industry's workforce demonstrated the tendency of American workers to sometimes abandon ethnic prejudice in the pursuit of common goals. At the same time, artisan glassworkers, mostly of British, French, and Belgian extraction, did not seek an alliance with the industry's unskilled workers, and this limited the

⁶ Joan Scott, *The Glassworkers of Carmaux: French Craftsmen and Political Action in a Nineteenth-century City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974).

effectiveness of their union. Both tendencies, to temporarily abandon ethnic and racial prejudice and to fail to overcome workplace divides, likewise affected the Appalachian coal industry.⁷

Women and the Labor Movement

Early institutional labor histories focused almost exclusively on men, especially the interplay between male labor leaders and male employers. The shift to new labor history in the 1960s, which included Gutman's discussions of religion and immigration, led some labor historians to examine the role of gender in the formation of working-class consciousness. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, in "Disorderly Women: Gender and Labor Militancy in the Appalachian South," argues that gender roles and expectations informed women workers' demands for fair pay and equitable conditions. She further argued that changing gender roles in the 1920s shaped how some women viewed work. Although many of the women she discussed emphasized maternal duty and children's needs in their demands for higher wages and union recognition, others sought to expand women's roles in the workforce by arguing that all women, both single and married, had the right to seek paid work.⁸

Hall built on Temma Kaplan's work on women's labor activism in Barcelona in the early twentieth century. Kaplan argued that many Spanish women demanded fair conditions by emphasizing the state's expectation that women focus on childrearing. While this would seem contradictory at first glance, Kaplan demonstrates that Spanish women, including both those who did and did not work for pay, utilized patriarchal arguments to demand access to the goods and

⁷ Ken Fones-Wolf, *Glass Towns: Industry, Labor and Political Economy in Appalachia, 1890-1930s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

⁸ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "Disorderly Women: Gender and Labor Militancy in the Appalachian South," *The Journal of American History* 73, no. 2 (September, 1986), 354-382.

services necessary to fulfill their prescribed roles as homemakers.⁹ Hall's discussion of female textile workers in Elizabethton, Tennessee incorporates the contradictions and complexities of Depression-Era female labor activism. Gender roles and expectations deeply ingrained in local communities could both help and hinder female strikers. While many locals opposed a system they viewed as exploitative of female labor, others did not believe that women, especially married women, should be working at all, and they resented the flapper-style dress and spirited opposition to employer hegemony employed by many strikers. Gender informed the actions taken by strikers and locals' reactions. Hall builds on Kaplan's work by arguing that women workers held unique positions in the workplace, in which class and gender intersected to impact conflicts over employment, rights, and responsibilities.¹⁰

In "Trouble in the Mines: A History in Song and Story by Women of Appalachia," musicologist Henrietta Yurchenco argues that Aunt Molly Jackson, Sarah Ogan Gunning, and Florence Reece built on a history of women's activism in the coalfields, best represented two decades earlier by Mary Harris "Mother" Jones's dedicated work in West Virginia. Jackson, Gunning, and Reece represented a different strain of activism, however, since all three had been born in Appalachia, and each had family members in the mines. They drew on a rich history of musicmaking in the mountains to protest working conditions in the coalfields and the low wages that led to poor health and even starvation for some children. Without entirely abandoning gender roles that emphasized a life of motherhood for Appalachian women, Jackson, Gunning, and Reece found opportunities for empowerment and political participation in their musical attacks on the coal industry. Yurchenco further argues that their actions set the stage for future

⁹ Temma Kaplan, "Female Consciousness and Collective Action: The Case of Barcelona, 1910-1918," *Signs* 7, no. 3, *Feminist Theory* (Spring, 1982), 545-566.

¹⁰ Hall, "Disorderly Women," 354-382.

generations of women to take bold political action on issues like strip mining, black lung, and welfare rights.¹¹ Although she briefly discusses the history of women's community activism in Appalachia, Yurchenco offers little analysis of how women's traditional roles affected their use of music. This thesis will build on Yurchenco's work to understand the complex interaction of community, class, and gender in Appalachian women's activism. Rather than just focus on the power of particular songs, this thesis will address the roles that gender ideology, traditional values, and working-class maternal politics played in the creation and dissemination of Depression-era protest music.

Community studies allow labor historians to compare conclusions by analyzing the attitudes, habits, and identities of specific groups of workers. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, et al., in *Like a Family*, analyze several early twentieth-century textile mill towns in North Carolina. They argue that workers brought pre-industrial habits with them to their new workplaces, including their musical tastes and a sense of community that emphasized cooperation and solidarity. When anger against mill employers boiled over, this sense of community encouraged workers to band together to fight for justice and equity. At the same time, the desire for a coherent and stable community could work against unionization efforts. Organizing drives inevitably led to conflicts, since employers and even some workers vehemently opposed labor unions. Labor conflicts divided communities, and some workers came to resent unions, even as they did not necessarily disagree with unions' aims. Hall and her cowriters demonstrate that unionization was often a contentious and complicated process, both between workers and their employers and between the workers themselves. Although their analysis focuses on textile workers rather than coal miners,

¹¹ Henrietta Yurchenco, "Trouble in the Mines: A History in Song and Story by Women of Appalachia," *American Music* 9, no. 2 (Summer, 1991), 209-224.

many of the workers they discuss came from Appalachian backgrounds. Additionally, the decision to emphasize the roles that women played in textile communities, including as homemakers, farm laborers, and as workers in the textile mills, centralizes the importance of reproductive labor in an industrial economy.¹²

In *Pistol Packin' Mama*, Shelly Romalis analyzes the lives and activism of Aunt Molly Jackson and Sarah Ogan Gunning. Jackson drew on Appalachian song traditions to write lyrics that spoke of miners' travails, and she especially focused her attention on the effects of capitalism and industrialization on women and children. Romalis argues that Jackson used music to inspire miners with messages that reminded them of the most urgent reason for unionization and conflict: the effect poor wages had on the health and wellbeing of their children. Similarly, Jackson's half-sister, Sarah Ogan Gunning, penned songs that reflected the sense of loss and anger she felt after losing her children to malnutrition. Music provided a powerful outlet for Jackson's and Gunning's anger at the coal industry, but their songs offered more than personal solace. Romalis argues that Jackson's and Gunning's songs provided their community in Harlan County with a center around which protests could form by encouraging workers to stand in solidarity against coal companies. By analyzing the complex messages that Jackson and Gunning presented in their songs, Romalis's work demonstrates the intersectional nature of gender, class, and music in the Harlan County War.¹³

In *They Say in Harlan County*, Alessandro Portelli offers a community study that will be invaluable to this thesis. Portelli interviewed a wide variety of Harlan County residents over

¹² Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, et al, *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987).

¹³ Shelly Romalis, *Pistol Packin' Mama: Aunt Molly Jackson and the Politics of Folksong* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

three decades, and his work spotlights coal miners, community activists, religious figures, and coal operators. Although Portelli does not focus solely on Harlan County women, his interviews reveal the crucial roles that they played in the community's social and economic fabric. His interviewees present a portrait of Harlan County in which women performed crucial reproductive labor and constituted some of Harlan County's most outspoken and devoted activists for equity and justice. Due to the arduousness and danger of working in the coal mines, women in mining communities had long been responsible for the tasks necessary to maintain a household. Cooking, cleaning, farming, and taking care of livestock often fell to the wives and children of coal miners. Additionally, women bore the brunt of the fear associated with the dangers of mining. While coal miners themselves descended into the pit every day knowing that they might die, their wives had to live with the constant fear of being widowed. In addition to the natural fear of losing a loved one, women in the coalfields had to grapple with the fear of losing the steady income guaranteed by their husbands' work. Portelli's interviews reveal that that fear underlay the existence of coalfield women. Although they did not, and could not, allow this fear to consume them, many of the women knew at least one person who had died in the mines. His analysis of the power of women's activism recognizes that the patriarchal nature of Appalachian society did not preclude outspoken women. Indeed, the danger and uncertainty of the coal industry empowered Appalachian women by enhancing their responsibilities.¹⁴

Jessica Wilkerson builds on Portelli's work by analyzing Appalachian women's activism during President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society campaign. As they had during the Great Depression, Harlan County women relied on working-class maternal politics to further their

¹⁴ Alessandro Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

political goals. Although women nationally had more employment opportunities in the 1960s than they had in the 1930s, women in the coalfields still had few choices. By broadening the term “caregiving,” Wilkerson explains how women led the fight for better welfare services, including healthcare, food stamps, and housing. Taking advantage of the Great Society’s guarantee of maximum feasible participation by affected parties, Appalachian women sought to shape the welfare and development policies on which their communities relied. While Richard Nixon’s election in 1968 cut their efforts short, Appalachian women proved that they were willing to take the lead on issues related to family and community welfare, and they continued a trend that historians of the coal industry have noted. Additionally, many coalfield women took advantage of new civil rights legislation to argue for employment in mining. While this would seem at first a repudiation of generations of tradition in the coalfields, those women who took jobs in the mines often explained their efforts by arguing that mining provided the only employment that would allow them to support their families and continue living in Appalachia.¹⁵

Folk Music and the Labor Movement

Labor unions had recognized the value of music to organization attempts prior to the 1930s, but labor leaders diverged widely on which genre of music would be most appropriate for a workers’ movement. As William Roy demonstrates in *Reds, Whites, and Blues*, many left-wing intellectuals initially opposed the incorporation of folk music into movements to unionize workers. Roy charts the development of political folk music, music that workers increasingly adapted to promote solidarity, encourage striking workers, and direct strike activities. He argues that intellectuals, such as Charles Seeger, changed their views on folk music after witnessing its

¹⁵ Jessica Wilkerson, *To Live Here You Have to Fight: How Women Led Appalachian Movements for Social Justice* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019).

power in events like the Loray Mill Strike in 1929, the Harlan County War in 1931, and the Detroit Sit-Down Strike in 1937. While they had earlier viewed folk music as defeatist and fatalistic, many intellectuals later came to appreciate and celebrate it for its adaptability and emotional value for workers. By retooling old melodies that many workers remembered from childhood and replacing the original lyrics with words that reflected common grievances and goals, songwriters provided striking workers with an invaluable tool that strengthened their resolve on picket lines and clearly and emotionally conveyed their demands to a wider audience.¹⁶

The development of the radio as a form of mass communications technology in the 1920s and 1930s gave workers a medium through which to spread and absorb words of protest. In *The Voice of Southern labor*, Vincent Roscigno and William Danaher argue that the radio spread sentiments and songs that united Southern textile workers during their struggles against their employers in 1929 and 1934. While workers had incorporated music into protests and strikes for decades, with the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) especially famous for its use of folk music, the authors argue that radio made the quick and universal spread of pro-union sentiments possible by popularizing songs that reflected workers' discontent and demands. When former textile workers created songs for radio airplay, they often wrote lyrics that expressed workplace grievances. Hearing these songs reminded textile workers that others shared their burdens, demands, and hopes. Thus, when textile workers went on strike, they often sang the same songs,

¹⁶ William G. Roy, *Reds, Whites, and Blues: Social Movements, Folk Music, and Race in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

despite the distances separating workers in Alabama from those in the Carolina and Virginia Piedmont.¹⁷

Building on Roscigno and Danaher's work, Patrick Huber's *Linthead Stomp* addresses the development of country music in the Southern Piedmont's textile towns. Textile workers, such as Fiddlin' John Carson, Charlie Poole, and the Dorsey Brothers created some of the first commercial country music singles in the 1920s and 1930s. While most did not achieve lasting stardom, several gained at least temporary fame by writing and recording songs that discussed problems, experiences, and ambitions common to many textile workers. Huber argues that early country singers took complicated stances toward their employers, and that while several joined labor unions and participated in strikes, few became outspoken activists for unionization efforts. Instead of writing songs that explicitly called on workers to unionize, songs like "Cotton Mill Colic" by Dave McCarn emphasized everyday concerns like long hours, poor pay, the difficulty of stretching limited financial resources, and the effects of mill town conditions on family life and relationships. Huber argues that these songs, although they did not necessarily appear militant, inspired striking workers by reminding them of their shared grievances. Additionally, many songs incorporated existing melodies. Thus, many early country songs blurred the lines between folk and commercial music, but their familiarity made them easily adaptable by striking workers. This tendency to retool old melodies for new protest songs also existed in the Appalachian coalfields, and singers like Aunt Molly Jackson, Sarah Ogan Gunning, and Florence Reece frequently took advantage of existing song structures in their creations.¹⁸

¹⁷ Vincent J. Roscigno and William F. Danaher, *The Voice of Southern Labor: Radio, Music, and Textile Strikes, 1929-1934* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

¹⁸ Patrick Huber, *Linthead Stomp: The Creation of Country Music in the Piedmont South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

Industrial Development in Appalachia

Finally, the industrial development of Appalachia in the late nineteenth century unleashed changes that led to the increase in violence referred to as the coal wars. In *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers*, Ronald Eller argues that historians should view Appalachian industrialization as a complex process that did not objectively yield positive results for Appalachian people. He describes an Appalachia dominated by external capital and a small regional elite focused on personal enrichment. While the timber and coal extracted from Appalachia fueled American industrialization, few of the benefits remained in the region. He argues that instead of instigating a march of progress, industrialization transformed Appalachia demographically, environmentally, and economically in ways that benefitted wealthy landowners at the expense of small farmers and workers. In Eller's view, industrialization rendered Appalachia less independent, despite progressives' arguments that stable employment would "civilize" mountaineers. Instead, industrialization created new impetuses for conflict that culminated in the mass outbreaks of violence that characterized the coalfields from 1910 to 1940.¹⁹

In *Feud: Hatfields, McCoys, and Social Change in Appalachia, 1860-1900*, Altina Waller builds on Eller's insights and argues that industrialization led to perhaps the most famous incident of Appalachian violence: the Hatfield-McCoy Feud. Waller disputes traditional scholarly interpretations of the feud, which alternately described it as the result of Civil War animosities or some inherent problem in Appalachian culture. Instead, Waller argues that industrialization and acquisitiveness led to the feud, especially the Hatfields' ownership of a commercial logging operation. She argues that the feud entered its second, more decisive phase

¹⁹ Ronald Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Mountain South, 1880-1930* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982).

when bankers and capitalists sought to ready the Tug River Valley of West Virginia and Kentucky for development by railroads, large logging companies, and coal companies. Pro-development forces saw violence as a threat to industrialization, although Waller argues that developers exaggerated the prevalence of violence to justify crackdowns and state support for corporations.²⁰

While Eller and Waller both argue that industrialization threatened Appalachian people's independence, Paul Salstrom, in *Appalachia's Path to Dependency*, offers concrete economic analysis that demonstrates the degree to which industrialization transformed Appalachia politically, demographically, and economically. He analyzes various aspects of the Appalachian economy, including average farm size, income, crop yields, and the percentage of Appalachian people engaged in agriculture over time. Due to migration, large family sizes, and the tendency to divide family holdings among children, the average size of an Appalachian farm declined significantly between 1860 and 1900. When coal and timber companies began buying large swaths of land and denuding them of forests, many Appalachian people found it impossible to survive from farming and hunting. Salstrom argues that this inability to survive solely on farming, even as most Appalachian people still farmed on small plots, exerted a downward pressure on wages. Unlike coal operators in Pennsylvania and the Midwest, where miners could bargain with the knowledge that other industries and farming provided other possibilities, operators in Central and Southern Appalachia knew that their workers had few other options.²¹

²⁰ Altina L. Waller, *Feud: Hatfields, McCoys, and Social Change in Appalachia, 1860-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

²¹ Paul Salstrom, *Appalachia's Path to Dependency: Rethinking a Region's Economic History, 1730-1940* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1994).

While many Appalachian scholars have analyzed the demographic and political changes that accompanied industrialization, others focus on the specifics of the coal wars that erupted in Appalachia in the early twentieth century. John Hevener, in *Which Side Are You On?*, analyzes the events of the Harlan County War. He argues that the social and economic pressures related to industrialization directly caused the war. He further argues that Harlan County miners themselves led the efforts to unionize the county's mines. While other historians had emphasized the roles played by the UMWA and NMU in the struggle, Hevener aligns his work with new labor history by arguing that miners had their own local and personal reasons for resorting to violence independent of any ideological concerns. Both the UMWA and NMU discouraged violence, but miners did not initially heed either organization's demands for caution. Hevener further argues that miners did not initially feel loyalty to either labor union, abandoning the UMWA when it failed to provide support and ending affiliation with the NMU when the Communist Party's policies on religion and government clashed with Appalachian values. Instead, Hevener argues that Harlan County miners joined unions for personal and local reasons. Organizing provided access to official support for strike activities, and this proved essential to miners during the Harlan County War.²²

Turning the argument to West Virginia, David Corbin, in *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the West Virginia Coalfields*, argues that miners largely joined labor unions in response to the dictatorial control coal operators held over the residents of company towns. He argues that economic motivations did little initially to move miners in southern West Virginia, since mine work represented an increase in pay for most people of rural backgrounds. When coal operators

²² John W. Hevener, *Which Side Are You On?: The Harlan County Coal Miners, 1931-1939* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978).

resorted to severe limits on free speech and civil liberties, miners turned to the UMWA to address their grievances. Corbin argues that miners' sense of independence contributed to the coal wars in the early twentieth century. While he overemphasizes miners' independent streak and underemphasizes financial concerns, he correctly identifies the authoritarian atmosphere of coal towns as a catalyst of the coal wars.²³

While many historians have emphasized the dictatorial qualities exhibited by many coal operators, others recognize that coal town residents did not hold uniform opinions of the coal industry. Crandall Shifflett, in *Coal Towns*, argues that many miners valued the amenities found in coal towns, even if they also resented the tight controls many operators exerted on their workers. Incorporating interviews with former coal town residents, Shifflett argues that some people in company towns accepted the tradeoff between amenities and civil liberties. While not all towns offered good housing and services, some featured well-maintained homes, schools, churches, general goods stores, theaters, and saloons, alongside water and garbage systems that far outclassed what many Appalachian people could expect in rural settings. Shifflett does not exonerate twentieth century coal operators for the violent acts committed against striking miners, nor does he argue that all miners considered living conditions more important than civil rights and liberties. Instead, he explains why not all miners joined the UMWA or NMU, despite the dangerous working conditions, inconsistent pay, and harsh limits on free speech found in coal towns. By analyzing the nuances of company towns, Shifflett reminds historians that labor

²³ David Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields: The Southern West Virginia Miners, 1880-1922* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981).

conflicts are complex affairs and that all workers weigh the risks and rewards of resistance when choosing whether to join a union or not.²⁴

²⁴ Crandall Shifflett, *Coal Towns: Life, Work, and Culture in Company Towns of Southern Appalachia* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991).

CHAPTER ONE

WAR IN THE COALFIELDS: THE HARLAN COUNTY WAR, ITS ORIGINS, EFFECTS, AND PARTICIPANTS

When the Harlan County War began in 1931, the county had experienced extractive industry for a little more than two decades. Founded in 1819, Harlan County did not have a rail line until 1910, when the Louisville and Nashville Railroad finally cut through the county's forbidding mountains. Even as mining spread throughout eastern Kentucky and southern West Virginia, most people in Harlan County still relied on agriculture for their living as late as 1910. While lumber companies had harvested timber in Harlan County since the 1890s, only about ten thousand people lived there when the railroad finally reached the county. From there, the county's economic output and population boomed. The arrival of the railroad allowed land speculators and industrialists to gain access to a resource far more valuable than timber: coal. Although a latecomer to Appalachian mining, Harlan County quickly grew to become one of the most productive coal counties in Kentucky. By 1928, Harlan's mines produced more than 14,000,000 tons of coal per year, an astounding increase from a little under 18,000 tons in 1911. This rapid development required significant influxes of labor, and Harlan County's population increased more than six-fold between 1910 and 1930. By then, the once agricultural county had become one of the wealthiest in the state in terms of overall wealth.¹

Harlan County's massive coal deposits attracted a range of developers, including several large corporations such as U.S. Steel and International Harvester. The arrival of these companies revealed the key advantage Harlan County had, shared by other counties in West Virginia,

¹ John W. Hevener, *Which Side Are You On?: The Harlan County Coal Miners, 1931-1939* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 1-4.

Tennessee, and Kentucky, over its northern competitors: a large supply of cheap labor. Despite the higher transport costs associated with shipping Kentucky coal to northern factories, the relatively low cost of labor in Harlan County attracted capital. Here, the county's agricultural past and industrial present met. Paul Salstrom argues that coal companies could pay miners in central Appalachia less than northern miners because the former still had close ties to agriculture. By combining farm work with mining, Appalachian miners could afford to accept lower wages, since wage work still allowed them to gain more economic security than farming alone.² Unlike many other Appalachian mining counties, Harlan's mine workforce consisted primarily of mountaineers from surrounding counties and states and African American miners who moved from the Deep South to work in the county's "captive" mines, so called because the large companies that owned them, such as U.S. Steel and International Harvester, held sole right to the coal extracted from the mines. Many members of this relatively local workforce, which contrasted with the Italian, Polish, and Hungarian miners who worked in many mines in other Kentucky and West Virginia counties, continued to own small plots of land, and their produce helped sustain their families when combined with the wages they earned from mining. However, most miners who moved to Harlan County from adjacent counties and states did not own land locally. While some, especially those who lived relatively close by, owned land and could rely in part on food grown by their families, many relocated on a permanent basis to the coal camps established by coal operators throughout the coalfields during the early twentieth century.³

Like most other counties in the central Appalachian coalfields, Harlan County's miners had engaged in extended conflict with coal operators over unionization. Union organizing in the

² Paul Salstrom, *Appalachia's Path to Dependency: Rethinking a Region's Economic History, 1730-1940* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1994), 60-82.

³ Hevener, *Which Side Are You On?*, 3-5.

coalfields did not follow a clear trajectory prior to the Great Depression. During the federal regulation of the coal industry that accompanied World War One, the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) organized most of the county's mines. After the war ended, Harlan's miners participated in a national strike to win union recognition along with better wages and conditions. However, despite shutting down much of the county's coal output, the strike failed to win union recognition, and few of Harlan's miners remained union members by 1922. During the 1920s, coal operators bolstered their power in Harlan County by forming close relationships with Sheriffs George Ward and J.H. Blair. By offering substantial sums of money to law enforcement, paying deputies in the ostensibly public sheriff's department with private funds, and relying on their own private police, Harlan County's coal operators effectively curtailed union organizing in the 1920s.⁴ By controlling policing, both public and private, in Harlan County, coal operators there repeated a pattern prevalent throughout the coalfields of Kentucky and West Virginia. David Corbin's argument that West Virginia miners only became interested in the UMWA after years of repression at the hands of deputies and detectives hired by coal operators ignores the economic reasons miners had for unionizing, but it also reflects the reality miners faced as coal companies relied on increasingly draconian tactics and the real anger that many felt at the loss of basic civil rights and liberties.⁵

When the Harlan County War began in 1931, miners faced radically different circumstances than they had just three years earlier. The Great Depression sent coal prices spiraling, which led to a sharp decline in output. In 1931, Harlan County mines produced nearly 5,000,000 fewer tons of coal than they had in 1929. The value of this output likewise dropped

⁴ Ibid., 5-8.

⁵ David Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields: The Southern West Virginia Miners, 1880-1922* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 29-52.

from more than \$24,000,000 to less than \$14,000,000.⁶ To compensate for this decline, operators slashed employment, hours, and wages. Miners' yearly earnings fell by nearly forty percent, and starvation stalked miners and their families as dozens of children died of malnutrition. Even coal operators recognized the distress their employees faced, with one remarking, "The miners' families are still able to eat and keep warm, but I don't pretend they are living as they ought to live."⁷ While this operator did not admit to the scale of the problem, his remark demonstrates that living conditions had regressed significantly by 1931.

By March 1931, tensions in Harlan County had reached a breaking point. As the Depression continued and miners and their families suffered through the winter of 1930-1931, the UMWA organized thousands of miners and called its members out on strike. Coal operators reacted by evicting strikers from company housing, forcing the UMWA to provide food and tents for the thousands on strike. Sheriff John Blair's support for coal operators, along with the fact that coal companies paid the salaries of most of his deputies, spurred resentment as ostensibly public servants worked to evict strikers. Many miners retreated to the independent town of Evarts, where the chief of police, mayor, and other public officials voiced their support for the UMWA's organizing efforts. Violence mounted during the spring, with the infamous Battle of Evarts, in which at least four people died, in May spurring increased police brutality toward striking miners. Governor Flem Sampson activated the Kentucky National Guard, but even this failed to end the violence before the strike dissipated in July 1931.⁸

While much of the violence associated with the Harlan County War took place during the UMWA-led strike, national media focused more heavily on the second phase of the war, which

⁶ Hevener, *Which Side Are You On?*, 10.

⁷ *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 1 March, 1931, Quoted In Hevener, *Which Side Are You On?*, 11.

⁸ Hevener, *Which Side Are You On?*, 33-51.

began when the National Miners Union (NMU), a Communist Party-affiliated union joined the fray. Although the NMU entered a situation in which a larger, better-funded union had already failed to permanently organize Harlan County's miners, its involvement brought the attention and violence that made Aunt Molly Jackson, Sarah Ogan Gunning, and Florence Reece nationally famous. An article in the *New York Times*, published September 28, 1931, grabbed attention with the headline, "Harlan Coal Fields Face Civil War; Kentucky County is an Armed Camp."⁹ While the paper seems to have largely ignored the earlier violence in Harlan County, the presence of Communists drew national attention. Tellingly, the article mentioned the violence carried out during the months prior to publication, but the author warned readers to prepare for even more violence in the coming months. He stated bluntly, "I will put it categorically: Unless adequate relief is forthcoming, the violence of the last six months will be considered as child's play."¹⁰ Another article, published in the *Washington Post* in November, provided a sensationalized version of the threat posed by organized miners. The article portrayed "tales of clandestine meetings at which miners were alleged to have plotted death to 'the law' in Harlan County."¹¹ An article in the *Los Angeles Times*, published in May, did not even attempt to offer the miners' perspective on the fighting. Instead, the article only mentioned that Sheriff Blair had been unable to contain the unrest in the county and quoted Governor Sampson's assertion that "a reign of terror has been precipitated by some interlopers, Communists from outside the State who have taken advantage of the discontent resulting from unemployment."¹²

⁹ Louis Stark, "Harlan Coal Fields Face Civil War; Kentucky County is an Armed Camp," *New York Times*, 28 September, 1931.

¹⁰ Stark, "Harlan Coal Fields Face Civil War," *New York Times*, 28 September, 1931.

¹¹ "Death Plot is Laid to Miners' Union: Witness in Harlan Trial Tells of Clandestine War Council," *Washington Post*, 28 November, 1931.

¹² "Guns Ruling Coal Field: Troops Move on Harlan," *Los Angeles Times*, May 7, 1931.

While newspapers in 1931 largely parroted Kentucky officials' claims that Communists dominated the ranks of organized labor in Harlan County, they neglected to investigate the degree to which left-wing organizations had taken part in the organizing drive. The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), a union known for its revolutionary goals, barely paid attention to the UMWA strike or the fighting, while the NMU did not become involved until after the initial strike ended. Instead of a plot foisted on Harlan County miners by outsiders, the strike and attendant violence erupted from the miners' shared grievances. When Communists did begin organizing those miners who refused to return to work when the UMWA called off its strike, newspapers paid closer attention to the events in Harlan County.¹³

The NMU's entrance into the Harlan County War created a dynamic where members of the Communist Party and party sympathizers allied with rural miners. The NMU did not have as many members, as much money, or the history of successful organizing drives that the UMWA possessed. The Communist-backed NMU had attempted to organize miners in Pennsylvania prior to the Harlan County strike, and its efforts had failed. However, when the UMWA called off its strike, the NMU saw an opportunity to organize those miners most disaffected by its rival's retreat. Local and regional newspapers, seeing an opportunity to demonize striking miners, sharply condemned the NMU for its Communist affiliation. James Alverson, the editor of the pro-operator *Harlan Daily Enterprise*, wrote that, "*An iron heel must be used to stamp out the foul growth.*"¹⁴ His words proved prescient. Violence did not stop when the UMWA called off the earlier strike. Sheriff's deputies continued to harass, beat, and sometimes kill striking miners and union organizers, while miners also committed acts of violence against their

¹³ Hevener, *Which Side Are You On?*, 45-46.

¹⁴ James Alverson, *Harlan Daily Enterprise*, 9 August, 1931, Quoted In Hevener, *Which Side Are You On?*, 58.

antagonists. By the summer of 1932, the NMU's attempts to organize Harlan County miners had largely failed in the face of police brutality, repression, and miners' hostility to the union once they learned that the Communist Party supported interracial marriage and opposed Christianity. Still, the presence of Communists gave anti-union deputies a pretext to harshly repress any vestige of unionism they found among Harlan's miners. Sheriff Blair's deputies continued to harass union organizers, and fighting claimed several more lives during the winter of 1931-1932. Even the Clovertown soup kitchen, a symbol of union charity and solidarity to the miners' families it fed, did not escape violence when a deputy killed two miners there in a shootout in August.¹⁵

While the NMU recruited few of the miners who had returned to work when the UMWA called off its strike in July 1931, it did succeed in drawing attention to the violence that had engulfed Harlan County. Author Theodore Dreiser, who held leftist political beliefs, led a team of fellow authors to eastern Kentucky on a fact-finding mission to determine the validity of the NMU's claims of operator-led violence and violations of civil liberties. While Dreiser's political beliefs made him suspect to local officials and his biases have led historians to question the reliability of his work, his interviews conducted with local participants in the strife reflected the views of at least some of Harlan's miners. He mainly interviewed the relatively few miners who joined the NMU's strike call, along with their wives and a few other sympathetic citizens. He also interviewed such anti-strike figures as Sheriff Blair and newspaper editor James Alverson. Dreiser called his organization the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners. In the opening statement of *Harlan Miners Speak*, often known as the Dreiser Report, he wrote, "against the workers who demand for themselves and their families the basic human rights and

¹⁵ Hevener, *Which Side Are You On?*, 55-88.

decent conditions of life and work, there is a constant attack directed by the employing and owning class and carried on through every available channel of education, publicity and law.”¹⁶ He went on to write that the committee “will act to aid in repealing all anti-labor laws...to assist in the defense of workers prosecuted for their activities in organizing to demand civil rights or better living conditions.”¹⁷ Dreiser made no attempt to deny his support for the NMU and labor organizations more broadly, but the existence of his report and its subsequent popularity attests to the success the NMU had in drawing attention to the Harlan County War.¹⁸

The attention the NMU brought to the Harlan County War even led the Senate to consider an investigation into the reports of violence and intimidation emanating from Harlan County. A subcommittee of the United States Senate Committee on Manufactures met in May to hear testimony from witnesses and interested parties on the advisability of a full Senate investigation into labor strife in Harlan County and neighboring Bell County. While two senators supported a full investigation, the committee declined to investigate. Still, the NMU had brought significant attention to the Harlan County War and miners’ attempts to organize. While much of this coverage emphasized the political beliefs of the organizers and tried to paint them as outside agitators, it also drew attention from left-wing intellectuals and sympathizers like Theodore Dreiser. Additionally, it helped Aunt Molly Jackson, Sarah Ogan Gunning, and Florence Reece gain national renown.¹⁹

¹⁶ Theodore Dreiser, et al., *Harlan Miners Speak: Report on Terrorism in the Kentucky Coal Fields Prepared by Members of the of the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1970), ix.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, ix-x.

¹⁸ Hevener, *Which Side Are You On?*, 83-88.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 87-88.

Born Mary Magdalene Garland in 1880 in Clay County, Kentucky, the woman who would come to be known both within her community and nationally as Aunt Molly Jackson began her life when coal mining had not yet penetrated eastern Kentucky to the same degree that it had on the eve of the Harlan County War. However, her life soon became enmeshed with the processes of industrialization and mineral extraction that came to dominate the region in succeeding decades. Her father saw an opportunity to earn a living as a shopkeeper selling goods to miners in Laurel County, Kentucky, but he quickly lost his business after overextending credit to his customers. This forced him to take up more arduous work, first as a sharecropper and later as a coal miner. Thus, Jackson learned at an early age about the industrialization and commercialization of the Appalachian economy. Adding to the hardships stemming from her father's entrance into the dangerous and poorly paid life of a coal miner, she lost her mother to tuberculosis when she was six years old. This deeply impacted Jackson's understanding of her surroundings, and her loss influenced one of her first songs, a sad lament of her mother's passing.²⁰

In 1894, Jackson married a miner named Jim Stewart. This marriage would not be her last, but it pulled her even further into the world of mining. The couple moved from mining camp to mining camp as Stewart, like many miners in Appalachia at the time, ventured to different mines seeking better pay and working conditions. Around this time, Jackson also began her career as a midwife, and she earned her nickname of "Aunt Molly" while engaged in this line of work. She initially worked at the hospital in Clay County before moving to Harlan County, where she set up an independent practice.²¹ She would later trace her activism to this period,

²⁰Shelly Romalis, *Pistol Packin' Mama: Aunt Molly Jackson and the Politics of Folksong* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 60-65.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 73-76.

claiming years later that she had worked to organize miners in Bell County in 1910. In the introduction to her song, “Hard Times in Colman’s Mines,” which came from her correspondence with folklorist John Greenway (the song was recorded by Greenway for an album released in 1961 after Jackson’s death the previous year), she claimed, “This is a song I composed in 19 and 10 at a mining company in Bell County, Kentucky, when I was trying to get the miners to come out and strike for eight hours and better pay...I would sing this song and then I would make a long speech, and this way I organized that group of miners while they was in my reach.”²² While her contemporaries, including her half-siblings Jim Garland and Sarah Ogan Gunning, often questioned Jackson’s account of her life, her decision to place her activism at such an early date demonstrates the importance she ascribed to her union advocacy.

By the outbreak of the Harlan County War, Stewart had died and Jackson had married Bill Jackson, whose surname she would keep even after she left him to go to New York City in 1931. Jackson became involved in union organizing almost as soon as the conflict began. Like others unwilling to accept defeat after the UMWA ended its strike, she joined the NMU. While the NMU still maintained a separate women’s auxiliary, rather than allowing women to join the union as full members, it allowed women to play a far greater role in organizing than the UMWA had. Although the NMU did not hide its affiliation with the Communist Party, Jackson swore no ideological commitment. She claimed that her unionism arose from her hatred of exploitation in the coal fields and the effect it had on miners and their families. Her songs in this period stood in contrast to the personal laments and light-hearted songs she had written as a child and teenager. In the 1930s, her lyrics focused on exploitation, miners’ suffering, and calls for all miners to

²² Aunt Molly Jackson and John Greenway, “Hard Times in Colman’s Mines,” *The Songs and Stories of Aunt Molly Jackson, Folkways Records*, FH 5457, 1961, Smithsonian Institute, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings.

organize to oppose the coal operators. She often grounded her criticism of coal operators in imagery that evoked the memory of the children who had died of malnutrition in the year prior to the beginning of the Harlan County War. She also claimed that her activism went beyond songwriting. In an interview conducted with Archie Green, she claimed to have taken part in the Battle of Evarts, stating, "I'm left handed and I was pulling the Colt.45 in this hand, .38 special in this hand, and I had a belt full of cartridges around me and an apron around me and it full of cartridges."²³

Archie Green, along with other scholars who interviewed Jackson and studied her life and songs, came to view her as someone whose word could not always be taken as fact. Even in the early stages of Green's relationship with her, he called her, "a person of complex personality, much creative talent, and a great capacity for self-aggrandizement."²⁴ Long after Jackson had died, Green sent a note to Shelly Romalis to beware the Garland family's tendency to exaggerate their life stories, stating, "watch out or Garland Clan will try to 'write' your book."²⁵ This note reflected a sense among Garland family members that academic writers threatened to distort the "true" story of the Harlan County War. This does not mean that Jackson should be viewed as a liar for her at times exaggerated claims. As Alessandro Portelli argues in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories*, memories often reflect an idealized version of events. Rather than conscious fabrications, such memories become ingrained in event participants' understandings of

²³ Archie Green, Interview with Aunt Molly Jackson, SFC Audio Open Reel FT-20002/4290, Archie Green Collection #20002, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Quoted in Romalis, *Pistol Packin' Mama*, 86.

²⁴ Archie Green, "Aunt Molly Jackson: A Bio-Bibliography," Folder 1088, Archie Green Collection #20002, Southern Folklife Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

²⁵ Archie Green to Shelly Romalis, April 5, 1994, Folder 3214, Archie Green Collection #20002, Southern Folklife Collection, University of North Carolina Wilson Library, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

their experiences.²⁶ Likewise, participants in the Harlan County War, including Jackson and her family, could view truth as a relative concept.

Jackson's contact with the Dreiser Committee during their investigation in the fall of 1931 put her on the path to national renown. In December 1931, she travelled to New York City, where, due to the minor fame she had already received by being mentioned in Theodore Dreiser's report, she immediately enmeshed herself in the growing folk-labor scene prominent among New York leftists and their allies.²⁷ Jackson took part in various labor demonstrations in the city during the 1930s, and she also worked with academics who sympathized with labor activists and wanted to preserve the folk music emanating from contemporary labor struggles. Jackson began appearing in articles in the New York press covering the labor movement shortly after her arrival in the city. A December 1931 article in the *New York Times*, written shortly after Jackson's arrival in the city, mentioned her simply as a woman from Kentucky who sang a "miner's song" at a New York event in support of a march of unemployed people on Washington, D.C.²⁸ Another article in the *New York Times*, written in April 1932, offered a less than flattering portrait of Aunt Molly, but one that demonstrated her working-class consciousness. The author described Jackson's involvement in a meeting where, "Knives flashed, fists flew and a serious riot between Socialists and Communists was narrowly avoided last night at the Rand School."²⁹ Jackson, alongside three other Kentuckians, created a stir when they demanded and were denied the opportunity to speak on the issues facing Kentucky miners, a

²⁶ Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991), 1-26.

²⁷ Romalis, *Pistol Packin' Mama*, 87-90.

²⁸ "Police Will Greet Jobless in Capital: Escort to Meet 'Hunger' Caravans Before They Reach District of Columbia Line," *New York Times*, 3 December, 1931.

²⁹ "Reds in Near-Riot at the Rand School: Woman Organizer Demands to be Heard at Kentucky Mine Protest Gathering," *New York Times*, 13 April, 1932.

seemingly fair demand since the meeting had been called for that purpose. This incident built on Jackson's earlier claims to have committed violence in defense of her community. While the article did not explicitly state the degree to which Jackson personally involved herself in this fight, she clearly did not shy away from violent expressions of workers' discontent.

As the 1930s progressed, press reports that mentioned the ongoing labor strife in Harlan County became more positive, or at least less derogatory. This corresponded with the rise of the Popular Front, an alliance between liberals, union members, and leftists of all stripes to support the New Deal, which in turn led the press to offer more positive depictions of striking miners than they had in the early days of the Harlan County War. For example, whereas many national news organizations had emphasized the Communist presence in Harlan County and warned of impending apocalyptic violence in 1931, a few years later many of the same papers published stories offering either more nuanced depictions of Harlan County or outright sympathy for the miners. For example, an article published in the *Washington Post* in April 1937 discussed the appearance of one of the infamous Harlan County "gun thugs" before the Senate Civil Liberties Committee. The writer depicted this man as, "a little man with sleepy eyes and a dangling cowlick, a cigarette drooping from the corner of his mouth."³⁰ The article went on to note his lack of remorse for his actions, stating, "'Thug Johnson, they call me,' said the little man with shamefaced pride."³¹ While the article did not directly condemn Johnson for his role in repressing unionizing efforts in Kentucky, this new willingness to expose the actions taken by coal operators and their hired guns demonstrated the possibility for more positive press coverage of the UMWA's organizing efforts in Harlan County. Even more conservative papers subtly

³⁰ Sidney Olson, "Harlan Deputy Says He Won Title of 'Thug' For Part in War to Smash Coal Mine Union," *Washington Post*, 30 April, 1937.

³¹ Olson, "Harlan Deputy Says He Won Title of 'Thug'," *Washington Post* 30 April, 1937.

shifted their tones when discussing Harlan County. *The Chicago Daily Tribune* reported on May 20, 1939 that the federal government sent food and supplies to striking miners in Harlan County, as well as a labor conciliator to mediate negotiations between the UMWA and Harlan County operators. The article also revealed that eight years had not stopped the violence between miners and operators, with one miner being shot by troops from the National Guard, after which miners retaliated by firing pot-shots at guardsmen. While the article still labeled union organizers as “red invaders,” the recognition of the federal government’s role in facilitating, or at least not officially opposing, unionization efforts marked a significant shift from 1931, when Herbert Hoover still held the White House.³²

Beyond her association with members of the Communist Party, Aunt Molly Jackson demonstrated a keen interest in national politics, especially after her move to New York City. During a recording session with Mary Elizabeth Barnicle, Jackson sang a song in which she exhorted Franklin Delano Roosevelt to run for another term for President. She sang, “Mr. Roosevelt, you must run again/The struggle for freedom must go on/In this country where our forefathers were bred and born/ These same oppressors who fought our forefathers are fighting you too.”³³ While Jackson’s support for Roosevelt corresponded to the Communist Party’s “Popular Front” policy of allying with liberals and progressives during the Great Depression, she also demonstrated her personal gratitude to Roosevelt for such New Deal policies as unemployment insurance, aid to impoverished families, and, especially important for a woman dedicated to organized labor, the government’s protection of workers’ right to form unions and

³² Charles Leavelle, “New Deal Steps Into CIO Mine War: Rush U.S. Food and Agents to Harlan County,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 20 May, 1939.

³³ Aunt Molly Jackson, Field Recordings Conducted by Mary Elizabeth Barnicle, New York City, 1939, Mary Elizabeth Barnicle and Tillman Cadle Collection, AppMs-347, Subgroup II, Series C, Box 9, Archives of Appalachia, East Tennessee State University.

bargain collectively. Jackson's personal political flexibility extended to her involvement in the labor movement. When she changed the title of her song, "Join the NMU," to "Join the C.I.O.," she recognized that the importance of organizing workers transcended loyalty to any particular union.

For Jackson and other pro-labor activists, press coverage became less negative after 1932, but newspaper reporters did not always portray her, or her cause, in a positive light. While early reports tended to depict Jackson and others from Harlan County as dangerous Communists, later articles played on Appalachian stereotypes to offer New Yorkers a more benign, but less politically effective, portrayal. By 1935, rather than being portrayed as wide-eyed left-wing radicals, newspapers began treating Jackson and her compatriots as figures for parody. In the 1935 article describing her performances at New York University, the author began by describing Jackson as someone who "Has been a-singin' and a-composin' since she was a little tyke of ten."³⁴ The article devoted no more than a few words to Jackson's activist activity, and even that offered only a bare nod at what Jackson viewed as her significant contributions to working-class organization and resistance. While the acknowledgement of her performances at one of America's most prestigious universities marked a significant shift from the earlier coverage that defined her and other Harlan County unionists as menaces to society, press reports in this less anti-union era often came close to parody. The same article depicted Jackson in the stereotypical garb of a mountain woman, complete with corncob pipe. While Jackson certainly played a role in such a depiction, recognizing that the image enhanced her popularity by making

³⁴ "Mountaineer Woman Sings Ballads Here," *New York Times*, 21 November, 1935.

her a curiosity in New York, her need to appear in stereotypical clothing demonstrated the precariousness of her position in an urban setting.³⁵

By 1940, Jackson, along with other folk music performers who had been fêted by New York City in earlier years, began to sink into obscurity. An article in the *New York Times*, dated February 28, 1940, described Jackson's involvement in a musical program to aid Dust Bowl refugees, but the article mentioned nothing of her earlier work on behalf of various labor causes in New York City.³⁶ While Jackson had met some of the scholars who would record her music and memories, such as Alan Lomax and Mary Elizabeth Barnicle, in the 1930s, the decade spent in New York had not improved Jackson's financial position. She struggled to obtain a position with the Works Progress Administration, and she came to resent many of the scholars who recorded her work, claiming that they did not offer compensation for her efforts. By 1943, Jackson decided to leave New York City for the West Coast, eventually residing in Sacramento, where she died in 1960 on the eve of the folk music revival. She met with younger scholars like John Greenway and Archie Green during the last years of her life, and they recorded several interviews with her that offered her perspective on her activism and songwriting. While she died in relative obscurity, her songs continued to be performed by union members and supporters from a multitude of unions, and she remains one of the most famous labor songwriters of the first half of the twentieth century.³⁷

While Jackson became a well-recognized participant in the New York City folk labor scene in the 1930s, her half-sister, Sarah Ogan Gunning did not initially achieve the same level

³⁵ "Mountaineer Woman Sings Ballads Here," *New York Times*, 21 November, 1935.

³⁶ "Program to Aid 'Okies': Ballad and Dance Show to Help Dust Bowl Refugees," *New York Times*, 28 February, 1940.

³⁷ Romalis, *Pistol Packin' Mama*, 105-126.

of fame her sister enjoyed. This in part resulted from the attention Jackson received from Theodore Dreiser's fact-finding mission to Harlan County. It also resulted from personality differences. Gunning and Jim Garland would both claim that their half-sister tended to exaggerate her importance to the Harlan County War, while Archie Green similarly accused Jackson of inventing many of her claims to song authorship.³⁸ The two sisters did not enjoy a close relationship, with Gunning even singing a song declaring her dislike for her sister in an interview with Mary Elizabeth Barnicle. In this song, Gunning sang, "She had me taken off relief/She's dirtier than a dirty thief/She's mean, I mean/She's the dirtiest thing that ever you seen."³⁹

These personality differences and disagreements began during Gunning's childhood. Jackson freely admitted that she did not like Gunning's mother, while Gunning adored her and drew inspiration from her mother's devotion to mountain ballads. While Jackson frequently claimed authorship of disputed songs, Gunning took a humbler approach and denied any special talent as a singer or songwriter. These qualities endeared her to scholars, who often favorably compared her to Jackson. Still, Gunning's songs demonstrated just as much passion and anger as Jackson's did. No matter how humble she appeared in interviews, her lyrics spoke of a deep-seated anger at a system that would allow children to die, as two of hers did in 1931, for the sake of company profits.⁴⁰

Born in 1910 in Knox County, Kentucky, Gunning was three decades younger than her half-sister. Unlike Jackson, Gunning spent her formative years surrounded by the coal industry.

³⁸ Ibid., 111.

³⁹ Sarah Ogan Gunning, *Field Recordings Conducted by Mary Elizabeth Barnicle*, New York City, 1939, Mary Elizabeth Barnicle and Tillman Cadle Collection, AppMs-347, Subgroup II, Series G, Box 14, Archives of Appalachia, East Tennessee State University.

⁴⁰ Romalis, *Pistol Packin' Mama*, 128-131.

As a child, she moved between several coal camps in eastern Kentucky as her father sought in vain for better pay and decent working conditions. Unlike Jackson, Gunning played a relatively muted role in the Harlan County War, and her songs did not gain much notoriety until after her move to New York City. While Jackson relocated to New York City in 1931, Gunning did not join her sister in the city until five years later. Unlike her sister, Gunning claimed that she did not begin writing songs until she moved to New York. Initially, her songs demonstrated much the same anger at capitalism and the coal industry that Jackson articulated in her works. However, a few attributes differentiated Gunning's work from Jackson's. First, despite their shared memories of their devout Baptist father and their incorporation of melodies taken from religious hymns into their songs, Jackson generally did not claim much religious influence in her lyrics. Conversely, Gunning drew inspiration from Baptist and Pentecostal Holiness hymns. Politically, Jackson and Gunning both criticized capitalism's inequalities, but Gunning generally focused her attacks on coal operators instead of capitalism. She even changed the title of one of her early songs, "I Hate the Capitalist System," to, "I Hate the Company Bosses," to avoid being classified as a Communist. While Jackson claimed ideological ignorance when asked about her political beliefs, the contacts and relationships she formed with Communist Party members suggests a deeper political commitment than she admitted in interviews. Gunning, however, took care to distance herself from communism and did not make as many contacts within New York City's labor folk music scene as her sister did.⁴¹

Gunning did not experience the same degree of fame in the 1930s that Jackson had. While she occasionally performed in New York City and participated in interviews, her late arrival to the scene meant that she missed the peak in labor folk music's popularity that her sister

⁴¹ Ibid., 127-135.

experienced in the first half of the 1930s. Still, Gunning did make some links with other singers during the Depression, and these contacts, along with her fame as Jackson's younger sister, made her a person of interest to musicologists during the folk music revival of the 1960s. For instance, Woody Guthrie, the singer that many viewed as the leading folk songwriter of the 1930s and 1940s, praised Gunning in an April 1941 letter to Lomax, and he urged the latter to seek her out to see if she had written more songs. He referred to Gunning as, "America's singin' cousin Sarah Ogan" and stated that her songs, "tops all I ever heard."⁴² Guthrie's praise reveals the links forged in New York City's folk music scene, which brought many people of rural backgrounds together and offered them an audience of sympathetic leftists, liberals, and workers. As an Oklahoman who had witnessed the devastation caused by the Dust Bowl and the poverty and misery compounded by the Great Depression, Guthrie recognized in Gunning's songs a companion to his own songs about working-class resistance and resilience. This letter followed another that Guthrie had written to Lomax in July 1940. In the earlier letter, Guthrie told Lomax about a radio performance he had given with Gunning and her brother, Jim Garland. While he offered more praise for Garland than Gunning in this letter, his performance with Gunning demonstrates her immersion in the New York City labor folk music scene.⁴³

Gunning's radio collaboration placed her outside of her Kentucky community. Like her sister, she entered a broader working-class community in New York City. Performing on the radio allowed Gunning to reach a larger audience than she could through any individual

⁴² Woody Guthrie, Letter to Alan Lomax, April 1941, AFC 1940/004: Woody Guthrie Manuscript Collection: Box 1, Folder A, Correspondence, 1940-50; A-20, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁴³ Woody Guthrie, Letter to Alan Lomax, July 1940, AFC 1940/004: Woody Guthrie Manuscript Collection: Box 1, Folder A, Correspondence, 1940-50; A-20, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

performance. In Vincent Roscigno and William Danaher's discussion of radio and its effects on union organizing in Southern textile towns, they argue that radio allowed singers with mill backgrounds to reach a larger audience of millworkers than they could have through concert performances. The radio created networks of workers who knew and understood songs that expressed common grievances and forms of protest. While not all songs performed by these early radio singers included lyrics designed to protest working conditions in the mills, workers could spread protest much more quickly than in previous decades, especially as the radio became a common household possession.⁴⁴ The radio allowed Guthrie and Gunning to reach a wide group of New Yorkers, including middle-class supporters of the labor movement as well as workers from a variety of occupations. The interactions she had with non-miners broadened Gunning's sense of community, even as she kept a lower profile than her sister and did not engage in inter-occupational organizing to the same degree that Jackson did. While her songs still largely focused on the specific problems and demands of coal miners, her lyrics could easily be repurposed for use in other labor struggles.

Gunning largely disappeared from activists' view during the 1940s, and after a short stint with Jackson on the West Coast, she moved to Detroit. Unlike Jackson, however, Gunning lived to experience and profit from the folk music revival that emerged in the 1960s, partially in response to the Civil Rights Movement and other movements for racial and economic justice. The new interest in folk music revitalized Gunning's career, and she recorded albums and performed in front of thousands of people at various folk festivals.⁴⁵ However, press reports often deemphasized the labor aspect of Gunning's career. In a 1966 article in the *New York*

⁴⁴ Vincent J. Roscigno and William F. Danaher, *The Voice of Southern Labor: Radio, Music, and Textile Strikes, 1929-1934* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 26-31, 60-64.

⁴⁵ Romalis, *Pistol Packin' Mama*, 157.

Times detailing some of the older musicians in the Folk Music Revival, Gunning's labor activism received surprisingly little attention. The author quoted Archie Green's description of Gunning's work as the result of a Christian upbringing, a conservative outlook on life, and the radical politics she imbibed through her contacts with union members and supporters, but he focused on her musical style rather than the content of her lyrics.⁴⁶ In part, this reflected the depoliticized nature of Gunning's work by the 1960s. By changing the lyrics and even titles of some songs to make them less radical and performing apolitical Appalachian folk songs, Gunning presented herself as a singer largely devoid of ideology. This contrast with her sister demonstrates the complexities of women's activism in Appalachia. While both women strongly condemned coal operators and sought better standards of living for workers and their families through union organization, Jackson's outspoken left-wing activism differed from Gunning's more subtle approach.

Compared to Jackson and Gunning, Florence Reece was a relative newcomer to Harlan County in 1931. However, while she only composed one famous song, that composition, "Which Side Are You On?," remains perhaps the most famous labor song to originate from the Harlan County War. Reece was born in Sharps Chapel, Tennessee in 1900. Her father mined coal, and she married Sam Reece, also a miner, in 1914. In a 1971 interview with Ron Stanford, Reece remembered, "I found out about the union in 1920 in Fork Ridge. When the miners started out trying to get a contract in 1920, they brought in the militia...A lot of the men were run off, though, and Sam like a lot of the rest of them, went to Kentucky."⁴⁷ Thus, before they came to

⁴⁶ Robert Shelton, "Folk Singers from the 'Source'," *New York Times*, 24 April, 1966.

⁴⁷ Ron Stanford, Interview with Florence and Sam Reece, Florence and Sam Reece Recording Project, AFS 14,588-14,589, Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Harlan County, the Reece family had already experienced attempts to organize a miners' union, and they understood the risks of state violence that miners faced if they chose to strike. She did not say whether the family immediately moved to Harlan County or somewhere else in the Kentucky coalfields, but the Census record for 1930 shows that by that point they had moved to Harlan.⁴⁸ While Jackson and Gunning both had husbands who offered lukewarm support at best to their wives' activism, Reece and her husband strongly supported the NMU when it arrived in Harlan County. Like Jackson and Gunning, however, Reece focused on the damage the coal industry did to miners' wives and children. She later stated, referencing her thoughts when she decided to become involved in the union, "I said, 'If I lose my life in this, it'll be better for my children, because things are going to get worse unless something's done.'"⁴⁹ Like many other people in Harlan County, she detested the sheriff's deputies and armed guards that terrorized miners and their families. Still, even when discussing an element of coal country repression that primarily targeted male miners and their wives, she attacked the "gun thugs" for the wrongs they indirectly inflicted on children. She stated, "The operators were paying these gun thugs, but they wouldn't recognize the union that would make it so that the men could feed their children."⁵⁰ While she did not know Aunt Molly Jackson personally, she emphasized similar issues and claimed to have no ideological interest in communism. When confronted by a man who worked for Sheriff Blair, who accused her of being a Communist, she thought, "Communist, what's a Communist? Communist and I.W.W.-that's two things I kept wondering what it was, and I

⁴⁸ Department of Commerce U.S. Census Bureau, Population Schedule, 1930 United States Federal Census, District 8, Harlan, Kentucky, Ancestry Library Edition, U.S Federal Census Collection, Accessed 30 March, 2021,

<https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/search/categories/usfedcen/>.

⁴⁹ Stanford, Interview with Florence and Sam Reece.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

knowed I hadn't heard it in the church.”⁵¹ Jackson associated with Communist Party members in New York City and Reece became active at the Highlander Folk School, which Southern conservatives labeled a Communist front, but their refusal to label themselves as Communists demonstrates that both combined working-class maternal politics, which drew on patriarchal gender norms, and alliances with leftist organizations in their activism.

After the Harlan County War, Reece continued to work for various labor causes, and she also supported other movements for social justice, such as the Civil Rights and anti-war movements. She worked for Henry Wallace's failed campaign for the presidency in 1948, and she criticized white Southerners who opposed civil rights for African Americans.⁵² Until her death in the 1980s, she worked to organize miners. She famously appeared in Barbara Kopple's documentary about the 1973 Brookside Strike, *Harlan County, U.S.A.* In that film, she sang “Which Side Are You On?” in front of a packed union hall. More than forty years had passed since she had written the song after “gun thugs” invaded her home looking for her husband, but the song demonstrated a staying power that made it just as relevant to the younger generation of miners and miners' wives as it had been to the older.⁵³

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Barbara Kopple, *Harlan County, U.S.A.*, directed by Barbara Kopple (1976; New York City: Cabin Creek Films), DVD.

CHAPTER TWO

“COME ALL YOU COAL MINERS”: FOLK MUSIC AS AN ORGANIZING TOOL IN HARLAN COUNTY

By the time the Harlan County War began, Harlan’s miners had attempted-and failed-to permanently organize on several occasions. The failure to do so meant that miners had no organization they could rely on to negotiate with coal operators over wages, hours, and working conditions. The ever-present “gun thugs” restricted miners’ speech, while anti-labor state and federal court decisions hampered union organization. These conditions made Harlan County a difficult area for the UMWA to organize, and the NMU faced similar problems when it attempted to organize miners in the wake of the failed UMWA strike.

Given the difficulties that outside organizers dealt with, local miners largely led the efforts to organize the county’s miners. As local people, Aunt Molly Jackson, Sarah Ogan Gunning, and Florence Reece enjoyed a degree of access to miners that non-local organizers did not possess. They composed songs that explicitly called on miners to unionize, and their works contained rhetoric that categorically placed miners and operators on diametrically opposed sides of the conflict. In “Which Side Are You On?,” Reece gave her audience a simple option: “Will you be a gun thug/Or will you be a man?”¹ Such lyrics reminded miners of the choices they faced, as well as the expectations from fellow miners and their families that they would join and actively support the miners’ union.

While “Which Side Are You On?” remains Reece’s primary claim to fame, Jackson and Gunning recorded a range of songs that celebrated labor unions, encouraged miners to organize,

¹ Florence Reece, “Which Side Are You On?,” Performed by Jim Garland, Recorded 13 November, 1937, Alan Lomax and Mary Elizabeth Barnicle Collection, AFC 1938/008, American Folklife Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

and extolled their own roles in organizing workers. By defining themselves as working-class people, all three women appealed to workers by demonstrating their deeply personal understandings of workers' problems. They sought to remind workers of their collective class status, and they often exhorted workers to achieve class solidarity beyond loyalty to their specific union. Their songs, when combined with their contemporaries' words, offer important examples of the intertwining of folk music and union organization efforts during the Great Depression. This chapter demonstrates the importance of folk music as a tool to organize workers and shape working-class consciousness. By writing lyrics that not only encouraged Harlan County miners to organize, but also implored them to organize consciously as members of a working-class that transcended occupational lines, Jackson, Gunning, and Reece sought to create a labor movement that would benefit all working-class people.

Although women could not work in the coal mines, Jackson clearly defined herself as working-class and fervidly pro-union. In her performance of "Join the C.I.O.," a reworking of her earlier song, "I am a Union Woman," she declared, "I am a union woman, just as brave as I can be. I don't like the bosses, and the bosses don't like me."² With these words, she portrayed herself as a staunch defender of working-class interests. While Jackson became one of the most outspoken supporters of unionization in Harlan County, her husband held ambivalent views toward labor unions, especially after he lost his job because of his wife's activism. Jackson went on to sing, "When my husband asked the boss for a job, this is the words he said, 'Bill Jackson, I can't work you, sir, your wife's a Rooshian Red.'"³ Despite this opposition and the hardships

² Aunt Molly Jackson, "Join the C.I.O.," Recorded 13 November, 1937, Alan Lomax and Elizabeth Barnicle Collection, American Folklife Collection, AFC 1938/008 Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

³ Jackson, "Join the C.I.O."

inflicted on her family, Jackson did not surrender her beliefs, nor did she end her strong support for the NMU, or later the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).

Likewise, Gunning often emphasized her personal commitment to union organizing in her work. To effect the changes in workplace relations she desired, Gunning wrote lyrics that described herself, and other coalfield women, as leading participants in the efforts to organize the mines. In “I’m Going to Organize, Baby Mine,” she sang, “I’m goin’ to lead the workers/For I sure can’t be a shirker/Oh, I’m going to lead the workers, baby mine.”⁴ In this song, her focus on organizing workers combined with a sense of duty that she believed all working-class people shared toward the labor movement. When she sang that she could not be a shirker, she subtly reminded workers that they would be considered traitors to their class if they failed to contribute their efforts to the labor movement.

Although Gunning would later moderate her lyrics by removing references to capitalism, her early work demonstrated strong hatred for the capitalists who she blamed for the suffering she witnessed in Harlan County. In her song, “I hate the Capitalist System,” Gunning sang, “Oh, yes, I guess you wonder/What they have done to me/I’m going to tell you/My husband had TB/Brought on by hard work and low wages/And not enough to eat.”⁵ By explicitly blaming capitalism for mining families’ suffering, Gunning allied herself with the more radical elements of the labor movement. She went on to sing, “They call this the land of plenty/To them I guess it's true/But that's to the company bosses/Not workers like me an' you/Well, what can I do about

⁴ Sarah Ogan Gunning, “I’m Going to Organize, Baby Mine,” Recorded 13 November, 1937, Alan Lomax and Mary Elizabeth Barnicle Collection, AFC 1938/008, American Folklife Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁵ Sarah Ogan Gunning, “I Hate the Capitalist System,” Recorded 13 November, 1937, Alan Lomax and Mary Elizabeth Barnicle Collection, AFC 1938/008, American Folklife Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

it/To these men of power an' might?/I tell you company bosses/I'm goin' to fight, fight,
fight./What can we do about it/To right this dreadful wrong?/We're all goin' to join the union/For
the union makes us strong.”⁶ As a call to action, “I Hate the Capitalist System” emphasized
Gunning’s personal suffering, which she shared with many of the people in her audience, and she
offered unionization as a remedy to that suffering.

While Gunning would later explicitly disavow any interest in the Communist Party,
Jackson linked political activism with efforts to organize labor unions. While Jackson repeatedly
denied even knowing what a Communist was before coming to New York City, her association
with the party and its members suggests a woman more politically astute than newspaper editors
admitted. Her affinity for the Communist Party and its members came from her personal
experiences. Not only had the NMU stepped in when the UMWA failed to provide Harlan
County miners with adequate support in 1931, it had also sent several notable organizers and
workers to Harlan County with whom Jackson and her family had grown close. Harry Simms, a
young man from Massachusetts, figured prominently in Jackson’s work, since Simms and Jim
Garland, her half-brother, became close friends. To Jackson, Simms deserved praise because he
willingly left his home in Massachusetts to come to Harlan County and help strangers organize a
union to fight for their rights. When a company-hired armed guard killed an unarmed Simms,
Jackson and Garland wrote the lyrics to “The Death of Harry Simms.” In the song, Jackson sang
a eulogy to Simms, regarding him as “The bravest union man that I have ever seen.”⁷ Jackson
and Garland were not alone in mourning Simms’s death. Other community members decided to

⁶ Gunning, “I Hate the Capitalist System.”

⁷ Aunt Molly Jackson and John Greenway, “The Death of Harry Simms,” *The Songs and Stories of Aunt Molly Jackson*, Folkways Records, FH 5457, 1961, Smithsonian Institute, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings.

take justice into their own hands. In a later interview with John Greenway, Jackson remembered, “The gun thug got away and hid in the caves for six months, and one night he started to cross the road and someone shot him six times with a Colt .45.”⁸

Jackson’s sense of community defense and empowerment extended beyond miners’ conflicts with coal operators. Anyone who she believed sought to defraud working-class people could find themselves in her crosshairs. In a song entitled, “The Dishonest Miller,” Jackson excoriated people who took advantage of workers’ needs. In a song that served as a metaphor for the hated company stores, Jackson sang about a dying miller who questions each of his sons to determine which should inherit his business. The miller refuses to will his oldest son the mill after the son states, “Out of a bushel a peck I’ll take,” for his price. Likewise, the miller decides against his middle son when he states he will only take half of each customer’s corn. Finally, the miller chooses to will the mill to his youngest son after the latter promises to take, “The whole thing, including the sack,” as his price. In the final stanza, the miller dies, happy to have at least one son who thinks like him.⁹ While Jackson pulled the metaphor from a pre-industrial age where the miller, rather than the boss, had the greatest capacity to defraud working-class people, she knew that her audience would make the connection to their contemporary circumstances.

In “The Dishonest Miller,” Jackson drew on what historian E.P. Thompson referred to as the moral economy. Thompson argued that certain pre-industrial moral values, especially those concerning the fair distribution of necessary resources such as food and shelter, survived into the industrial age. When millers, or coal operators and their agents in Jackson’s era, violated

⁸ Jackson and Greenway, “The Death of Harry Simms.”

⁹ Aunt Molly Jackson and John Greenway, “The Dishonest Miller,” *The Songs and Stories of Aunt Molly Jackson, Folkways Records*, FH 5457, 1961, Smithsonian Institute, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings.

community expectations, they faced corrective action from those who felt exploited by their fraudulent behavior. To Thompson, outbursts of anger at violations of the moral economy marked the start of working-class consciousness. He focused on bread riots in seventeenth-and-eighteenth century England, but Jackson's song demonstrates the continuity of certain values that motivated working-class resistance.¹⁰

While coal operators viewed Jackson's involvement with Communist Party members as sufficient evidence to accuse her of being a dangerous influence in Harlan County, she had a complicated relationship with the party. Her songs consistently demonstrated disgust with coal operators, who she identified as being the cause of the misery she witnessed in her community. Furthermore, her take on profiteering in "The Dishonest Miller" suggested a broader dislike of capitalism and exploitation. Still, Jackson's lyrics evinced a deep concern with the material effects of capitalism, rather than any ideological commitment to socialism or communism. Even in "The Death of Harry Simms," her eulogy to the Communist Party member and NMU organizer killed by company gunmen, she directed her anger at a system that would allow wealthy men to get away with murder, rather than at the structures of capitalism. Her views aligned with other community members who saw in the NMU an opportunity to alleviate their material poverty and restore civil liberties and rights that law enforcement in company towns refused to let them exercise. One miner's wife, when asked by Theodore Dreiser what would happen if the miners would end their involvement with the NMU and return to work, replied, "If these men knuckle down to these conditions and put up with these yellow dog contracts, in less

¹⁰ E.P. Thompson, "The moral economy of the English crowd in the eighteenth century," *Past & Present* 50, no. 1 (1971), 76–136.

than a year from now they will be getting on their knees for a drink of water.”¹¹ The sentiment this woman expressed corroborates David Corbin’s argument that miners organized in reaction to violations of their civil liberties in mining towns. While Corbin’s analysis understated the importance of economic need to miners’ organizing campaigns, the anger caused by violations of civil rights and liberties expressed by several participants in the Harlan County War demonstrates that miners and their families had multiple reasons for going on strike in 1931.¹² This sense of dignity often went beyond anger at their impoverished living conditions. The same woman recounted that sheriff’s deputies had thrown tear gas at her during a mass meeting where she was reading the Bible to a group of women.¹³ These frequent abuses of civil rights and liberties did inspire hostility towards the operator elite and their armed guards, and union supporters often emphasized the reclamation of dignity and rights, as well as improved wages and working conditions, as principal demands.

Jackson, Gunning, and Reece all condemned coal operators for their reliance on armed guards, which all three viewed as a gross violation of miners’ rights and liberties. Others in their community confirmed the anti-“gun thug” element of their works. One woman interviewed by the Dreiser Committee, who identified herself as Viola Grace, met with members of the committee at the Continental Hotel in Pineville, Kentucky. In the interview, she described herself as the wife of a union organizer and discussed the threats and actual violence she and her husband had been subjected to by sheriff’s deputies paid by local coal companies. Grace

¹¹ Theodore Dreiser et al., *Harlan Miners Speak: Report on Terrorism in the Kentucky Coal Fields Prepared by Members of the of the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1970), 207.

¹² David Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the West Virginia Coalfields: The Southern West Virginia Miners, 1880-1922* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 29-52.

¹³ Dreiser et al., *Harlan Miners Speak*, 206.

appeared to consider her husband's activism a point of pride. Although he no longer worked in the mines, and had not for some time, she supported unionization. Speaking of her husband and his fellow organizers, she stated, "they were trying to get the union organized. They were organizing against starvation. They were establishing a union for better conditions."¹⁴ In a later interview, conducted in Harlan County, Grace defended her unionism in stronger terms. In response to a question concerning the NMU's demands, Grace responded, "they are asking for a little more bread and meat for the starving people, better homes to live in and Harlan County a fit place to live in and coal miners regarded more than as jack rabbits to be shot at."¹⁵

Harlan County miners had experienced successive unionization efforts. Their continued support for the NMU demonstrated that many community members would fight for organization, regardless of how many failures they had experienced. Jack Scalf, a miner who stated that he had worked in the mines since childhood, reported that he had been successively a member of every miners' union that attempted to organize in eastern Kentucky. When asked how this was possible, since unions did not typically accept members of other labor organizations, he replied simply, "I belong to the Miners Union."¹⁶ George Ruth, another miner who had worked as a miner since 1889, stated that he had been a union man since 1893.¹⁷ Other miners turned to the NMU despite being previously uninterested in unions. Henry Thornton, who when interviewed had lost his job as a miner and had taken a job at Kroger's, reported that he had shown little interest in organized labor prior to his firing. After his employer fired him for attending a speech given by UMWA organizers, which Thornton claimed he did not attend, he joined the NMU.¹⁸

¹⁴ Dreiser et al., *Harlan Miners Speak*, 103.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 226-227.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 171.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 219.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 189-196.

While Corbin's argument falls short in explaining the Harlan County War, since miners and their families cited strong economic motivations for their decisions, Thornton's testimony reveals that miners did chafe under the harsh restrictions placed on them by Harlan County coal operators.¹⁹ Despite acknowledging that his job did not offer consistent pay or security, Thornton denied having attended a UMWA meeting. While this does not mean that his economic situation satisfied him, his decision to join the NMU after losing his job demonstrated the anger he felt at the violation of his basic civil rights.²⁰

Despite accusations of bias, Theodore Dreiser's report demonstrated that not all coalfield households, even those who felt no sympathy for coal operators, supported efforts to organize a union. Nannie Powers, a miner's wife, evinced an ambivalence toward the NMU, albeit not out of any hostility to workers' organizations. When asked if she supported her husband's decision to join the NMU, she stated, "I don't know. It is all right as long as it is carried out right, but when times is hard they don't do much. I told him when this one died out...I never wanted him to join any more."²¹ This testimony from a woman whose husband had been arrested for his union membership demonstrates that miners and their families had to make careful decisions when fighting broke out between union members and coal operators. Despite her ambivalence toward unions, Powers demonstrated no sympathy for coal operators or their hired gunmen. She referred to the latter as "thugs," a term commonly used by union sympathizers to attack the sheriff's deputies paid by mining companies as well as the detectives hired directly by the coal operators as armed security. Perhaps her experiences with violence and the UMWA's earlier failure to organize Harlan County had soured her against unions. Elizabeth and Ken Fones-Wolf,

¹⁹ Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the West Virginia Coal Fields*, 29-52.

²⁰ Dreiser et al., *Harlan Miners Speak*, 189-196.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 161.

in *Struggle for the Soul of the Postwar South*, their analysis of evangelical Protestantism's relationship to the CIO's Operation Dixie, argue that many textile workers demonstrated reluctance to organize because of their earlier experiences with violent union-busting in the 1930s.²² Having experienced the lengths to which coal operators would go to block union organizing efforts, some Harlan County miners and their families believed that the risks of unionization outweighed the rewards.

Jackson, Gunning, and Reece based their activism in their personal experiences with coalfield oppression and suffering. By reminding their audiences of their connections to coal miners and understanding of the coal industry, their work resonated with coal miners and their families. In "Come All You Coal Miners," Gunning sang, "I was born in old Kentucky/In a coal camp born and bred."²³ Gunning builds the song around this simple assertion. The coal camp, as a place experienced and understood by nearly all coal miners in eastern Kentucky, framed the struggles of the coal wars. By alluding to coal towns, Gunning immediately connected other peoples' experiences to her own. The common experiences in coal towns gave miners a shared symbol of oppression and resistance. Corbin argues that West Virginia coal miners created community within coal towns, despite the repressive nature of company surveillance. He portrays the close connections that miners and their families formed in the coal towns as the catalyst for the waves of protest and violence that swept through southern West Virginia in 1912 and again in 1921.²⁴ Likewise, Crandall Shifflett, while offering a more nuanced portrayal of

²² Elizabeth Fones-Wolf and Ken Fones-Wolf, *Struggle for the Soul of the Postwar South: White Evangelical Protestants and Operation Dixie* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 6.

²³ Sarah Ogan Gunning, "Come All You Coal Miners," Recorded 13 November, 1937, Alan Lomax and Mary Elizabeth Barnicle Collection, AFC 1938/008, American Folklife Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

²⁴ Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the West Virginia Coalfields*, 61-79.

politics and power in coal towns, argues that company towns created communities of workers that transcended their experiences in the mines. While the common dangers miners faced in their daily work lives feature in his and Corbin's account of community building in coal towns, the social, recreational, and cultural connections miners and their families made also forged communities that could unite in protest.²⁵ When Gunning placed her origins in a coal camp, she evoked for her listeners an image that combined community with company repression and poverty. Many in her audience, especially younger miners and their wives, could connect Gunning's words to lives lived entirely within the confines of eastern Kentucky coal camps. When she sang about "the pinto beans, bulldog gravy, and cornbread" and "how coal miners work and slave in the coal mines every day," her audience could quickly associate her words with their own lives.²⁶

While Florence Reece did not achieve the same level of fame as Jackson or Gunning did, her most famous song, "Which Side Are You On?," called on all miners to organize by presenting them with vivid imagery that emphasized suffering and resistance. In one verse, she celebrated her family's support for the union, singing, "My daddy was a miner/He's now in the air and sun/He'll be with you fellow workers/'Til every battle's won."²⁷ By repeatedly asking workers which side they would take in the fight to organize miners, Reece knew that many had deep familial connections to the mines and to union organizing. The song essentially gave miners the choice to either betray their fellow workers, and by extension their kin who supported the union, or fight until all Harlan County mines had been organized. Like Jackson and Gunning,

²⁵ Crandall Shifflett, *Coal Towns: Life, Work, and Culture in Company Towns of Southern Appalachia* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 1-26.

²⁶ Gunning, "Come All You Coal Miners."

²⁷ Reece, "Which Side Are You On?."

Reece positioned herself as someone with intimate knowledge of coal miners' struggles. When she sang about her father, she revealed his death in the mines. Many of the people in her audience had likewise lost family members or friends in the mines. For instance, Jackson, in an interview with Billy Faier, revealed that she had lost a stepson in a mining accident while she was living in New York City.²⁸

Reece's assertion that her father would be with the miners in spirit also drew on a tradition of solidarity created by the harsh working conditions experienced by coal miners. In, *Killing for Coal*, his study of Colorado's coal miners, Thomas Andrews argues that miners developed a sense of solidarity that overcame ethnic, religious, and racial tensions. The shared experiences of danger and exploitation led miners in Colorado and in Appalachia to travel for miles to aid men they had never met after a mining disaster, and this solidarity contributed to the widespread rebellions that characterized the Colorado coalfields in 1914 following the Ludlow Massacre.²⁹ Likewise, coal miners in Kentucky, while living in separate coal towns, understood Reece's meaning when she included the loss of her father in her song. Labor organizing often required organizers to make personal connections with their audiences, and Reece's deep personal understanding of the sacrifices mining inflicted on miners and their families lent her an authority that made workers listen to her. As a member of the working-class, Reece could produce more effective music than dispassionate observers, and the timelessness of her most

²⁸ Aunt Molly Jackson, Interview with Billy Faier, Billy Faier Collection 20380, Folder 67, Southern Folklife Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

²⁹ Thomas Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2008), 147-153.

famous song reflects William Roy's argument that authentic productions of labor folk music have greater impacts on organization than music created by non-working-class people.³⁰

Jackson also drew on the ever-present danger of mine work to persuade miners to join the NMU and go on strike. In "Hungry Ragged Blues," utilizing imagery that spoke of the risks of rock falls in the mines, she sang, "Don't go under that mountain with the slate hanging over your head/And work for just coalite and carbine and your children a-crying for bread."³¹ She went on, "Oh, listen, friends and workers, please take a friend's advice/Don't load no more, don't pull no more, till you get a living price."³² While miners needed little reminder of the dangers they faced every day at work, Jackson's song admonished them to at least get a price for their labor that they and their families could live on. She pulled no punches in her demand that miners unionize, singing, "Just because it took all he made that day to pay his mine expense/A man that'll work for coalite and carbide ain't got a lick of sense."³³ Jackson and Reece both exhibited frustration with miners who did not join the NMU and remained at work, with Reece labeling every miner who refused to organize a "gun thug".³⁴ Still, both also offered the chance of redemption. Miners only had to take the step that hundreds of their fellow workers had taken and join the NMU strike.

To demonstrate the authentic character of their songs, Jackson, Gunning, and Reece all defined themselves as working-class women. When Jackson described herself as a union woman,

³⁰ William G. Roy, *Reds, Whites, and Blues: Social Movements, Folk Music, and Race in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 117-123.

³¹ Aunt Molly Jackson and John Greenway, "Hungry Ragged Blues," *The Songs and Stories of Aunt Molly Jackson*, Folkways Records, FH 5457, 1961, Smithsonian Institute, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings.

³² Jackson and Greenway, "Hungry Ragged Blues."

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Reece, "Which Side Are You On?."

she signaled something more than her personal support for labor organizations. When she sang, “But we are many thousand strong and I am glad to say/We are getting stronger and stronger every day,” she referred not only to the strength of the NMU (and later the CIO), but to the strength of working-class people.³⁵ To Jackson, being working-class could not be separated from support for labor unions. Gunning also routinely described herself as working-class and emphasized the importance of class solidarity. When she exhorted coal miners to “make this a land of freedom for workers like you and me,” Gunning clearly defined herself as a member of the working-class.³⁶ Likewise, lest her audience not grasp her commitment to organizing workers, Gunning sang in “I’m Going to Organize, Baby Mine,” “These are miners’ chilluns and wives/I’m compelled to save their lives/So I’m goin’ to organize, baby mine.”³⁷ By emphasizing her commitment to specifically saving miners’ wives and children, she declared her working-class loyalties. Although she did not explicitly label coal operators as the enemy in the song, by stating that organizing workers would save lives, she utilized the notion that coal miners, and by extension working-class people, formed an “us”, while operators formed a “them”. In “I am a Union Woman,” Jackson had similarly declared, “The bosses ride fine horses while we walk in the mud/Their banner is a dollar sign while ours is striped with blood.”³⁸ Reece, meanwhile, decried coal operators by angrily exclaiming, “Their children live in luxury/Our children almost wild.”³⁹ Such lyrics fit well into “Which Side Are You On?,” since they described the intractable and interminable conflict between working-class miners and propertied coal operators. As Reece

³⁵ Aunt Molly Jackson and John Greenway, “I Am a Union Woman.” *The Songs and Stories of Aunt Molly Jackson*, Folkways Records, FH 5457, 1961, Smithsonian Institute, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings.

³⁶ Gunning, “Come All You Coal Miners.”

³⁷ Gunning, “I’m Going to Organize, Baby Mine.”

³⁸ Jackson and Greenway, “I am a Union Woman.”

³⁹ Reece, “Which Side Are You On?”

later stated, “I was asking all the miners, all of them, which side they were on. They had to be on one side or the other; they had to be for themselves or they had to be against themselves. There wasn’t no such thing as neutral.”⁴⁰ While these lyrics also drew on a gendered perspective, which will be addressed in the next chapter, by referring to the specific struggles that women and children faced, they simultaneously relied on working-class, pro-union understandings of labor conflict in Harlan County.

Adding to their support for broad working-class organization, Jackson and Reece supported interracial unionism. While both women appear to have sincerely opposed the white supremacist violence common throughout the South, including in eastern Kentucky, they also recognized that the UMWA could not deny economic opportunities to non-whites if it wanted to build and maintain strength in the coalfields. At the time of the Harlan County War, Black miners made up about ten percent of Harlan County’s mine workforce, while they formed an even larger contingent in other parts of the coalfields and in some other industries. Black miners mostly worked at the “captive” mines owned by large corporations such as U.S. Steel and International Harvester. Considering the resources and power held by these companies, as well as the pressure that union members in Northern cities could place on them, union supporters in Harlan County recognized the importance of organizing all miners, regardless of race or ethnicity.⁴¹

Jackson and Reece sought to form broader coalitions that extended beyond the coalfields to encompass working-class people across the United States. While Jackson’s songs did not

⁴⁰ Ron Stanford, Interview with Florence and Sam Reece, Florence and Sam Reece Recording Project, AFS 14,588-14,589, Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁴¹ John W. Hevener, *Which Side Are You On?: The Harlan County Coal Miners, 1931-1939* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 3-4.

tackle race, she supported interracial unionism and told stories of her past that revealed an opposition to racism. Jackson interacted with Huddie Ledbetter, a Black blues singer from Louisiana better known as Lead Belly, in the New York labor folk music scene. For example, both performed at a 1940 concert intended to benefit Dust Bowl refugees.⁴² Jackson later recounted stories from her personal life in which she had opposed racism. Having lived in Florida briefly during the early 1900s, Jackson witnessed several acts of racism directed against Black people. For example, she expressed shock when she learned that a Black man could be lynched simply for speaking to her, and she also claimed to have threatened a white shopkeeper with violence after she saw him attack a Black employee.⁴³ Jackson's opposition to racism, seemingly arising as much from personal disgust with bigotry as the sense that racism would handicap unionization efforts, cannot be taken as typical of the views held by Appalachian women or labor organizers. As Jessica Wilkerson argues in *To Live Here You Have to Fight*, many white Appalachian people supported interracial unionism, but they had varied reasons for doing so. While some sincerely opposed racism, others simply recognized that any refusal to organize interracially would severely hamper efforts in an industry defined by the diversity of its workers. Like the rest of the South, Appalachia had a history of racial violence, segregation, and discrimination, and interracial unionism did not erase that past.⁴⁴ Still, Jackson's beliefs demonstrated that Appalachian women held complex views on issues of race. These views interacted with Jackson's experiences as a working-class woman who had witnessed many

⁴² "Program to Aid 'Okies': Ballad and Dance Show to Help Dust Bowl Refugees," *New York Times*, 28 February, 1940.

⁴³ John Greenway, *American Folksongs of Protest* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1953), 258.

⁴⁴ Jessica Wilkerson, *To Live Here You Have to Fight: How Women Led Appalachian Movements for Social Justice* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 6-9.

tragedies in Harlan County, and she emphasized the need for all working-class people, regardless of race, to unite to oppose corporate power.

Like Jackson, Reece also supported interracial unionism. Her support included activism through the Highlander Folk School, an institution known for its strong support of civil rights legislation and for training leaders and organizers in the Civil Rights Movement. Reece also worked for Henry Wallace's 1948 campaign for president, in which she faced opposition from Southern conservatives and racists because of Wallace's support for civil rights. She later stated that the campaign could not easily find places to hold rallies or meetings in Tennessee because of white opposition.⁴⁵ She also criticized the ignorance that she felt many Southerners continued to exhibit on racial matters. When asked by one white woman who opposed civil rights if she would like for her daughter to marry a Black man, Reece defiantly replied that she would much rather her daughter marry a Black man than a strikebreaker.⁴⁶ Reece's declaration that she would approve her daughter marrying a Black man before she would approve her marrying a white strikebreaker, along with her activism at the Highlander Folk School, demonstrates that her views often conflicted with prevailing Southern orthodoxy. Fundamentally, Reece understood that racism stood in the way of economic justice for all people. While she seems to have sincerely condemned racism from a moral standpoint, she also recognized the need for people of all races to unite to secure stronger bargaining power and better conditions for workers. Reece expressed her belief that young people had to unite if they wanted to change the government's stances on war and welfare for poor people. "They've got to get together and see that this government gives them jobs and builds them houses," Reece stated. "It's got to be done...The

⁴⁵ Stanford, Interview with Florence and Sam Reece.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

more they stick together, the more they'll get what they need.”⁴⁷ By drawing on her past as a union supporter and advocate for civil rights, Reece encouraged working-class youths to band together to create a better future for all people.

Reece's support for unionization resulted from her personal experiences with repressive company policies and the realities that unorganized miners faced. After company-paid police forced her family to leave their home in Tennessee, her support for organized labor intensified.⁴⁸ Unlike Jackson's and Gunning's husbands, Sam Reece supported his wife's involvement in the union and worked as an organizer himself. Early in their marriage, Sam became an ardent supporter of organizing efforts. Since he worked as a machine operator in Tennessee, he made more money than the typical miner. In a 1971 interview conducted by Ron Stanford, he remembered, “When we first started organizing, the men were afraid. It was just a dollar to join the union, and if the men didn't have a dollar, I'd give it to 'em.”⁴⁹ Thus, the Reece family formed part of the core of the NMU when it entered Harlan County. Like Jack Scalf and George Ruth, the Reeces had supported a succession of organizing drives directed by both the UMWA and NMU. While Florence Reece wrote “Which Side Are You On?” specifically as a protest against the crackdown on the NMU's efforts, her work should be considered a part of a longer tradition of organizing in the coalfields that transcended loyalty to any particular organization.

When she wrote her most famous song, Reece had lived with coal miners for most of her life. From listening to the experiences of her father and husband and through her own confrontations with anti-union police, she understood the tactics that coal operators used to prevent unionization. Discussing her experiences in Kentucky mining towns, she reported,

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

“There, the operators would shut down the mines and say that they’d sold out, but they only said that so they could get rid of the union.”⁵⁰ One incident that occurred in 1930, a year before the Harlan County War officially began, demonstrated the coercive power that operators exerted over their workers. Reece remembered, “When they run Sam off, they kept coming and searching the house with guns and everything, and they looked at everything we had.”⁵¹ When the searchers stated that they were looking for IWW literature and rifles, Reece reflected on the discrepancy between the official rights miners possessed and the reality that operators thrust onto them. “He (Sam) did have a rifle, but it was registered and everything; they just didn’t want him to have it. Everybody had guns up there—almost all the men shot them for sport.”⁵² In addition to her anger at the poor conditions that miners and their families faced, Reece expressed outrage at the denial of basic civil rights and liberties to miners. Reece’s discussion of unreasonable searches and seizures and denial of the right to bear arms corroborates Corbin’s argument that miners in central Appalachia chafed under the dictatorial regimes set up by coal operators. However, in the case of Harlan County, economic wellbeing cannot be separated from the defense of civil rights and liberties. When Reece attacked coal operators for paying large sums of money to finance company-supported policing while refusing to pay a living wage, she simultaneously attacked a system that subjected miners and their families to both indignity and starvation.⁵³ Her anger corresponded to the emotions felt by others in her community at the treatment meted out by coal operators and their hired guns.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

Beyond her songwriting, Reece played a significant role in the NMU's organizing drive. "I wanted to do anything I could. I kept some men in the house who had \$1000 dollars on their head, and I sat up all night to make sure the thugs didn't come. I fed them what food we had, and we got down to where we didn't have too much."⁵⁴ Her activism began before 1931, and she later claimed that she wrote "Which Side Are You On?" in 1930 after a raid on her home. While this song remains her most famous, she composed additional songs during the succeeding decades. One song, which she called "A New Recipe," dealt with war, an issue that she implied disproportionately affected working-class people. After stating that she had three sons who had served in the Marines during the Vietnam War, she sang, "I'm tearing up an old recipe/For poverty and war/We don't know why we're hungry/Or what we're fighting for."⁵⁵ By conflating the deaths caused by the Vietnam War with the suffering she witnessed among impoverished people in the United States, Reece demonstrated that working-class activism could extend beyond strike actions for better wages and benefits. She recognized that the same government that had the power to improve wages and working conditions had also decided to wage war in Vietnam, and she linked war and high military budgets to domestic poverty. Additionally, she stated that she had originally written the song during the Korean War, and her support for Henry Wallace's 1948 campaign suggests that she shared Wallace's anti-war approach to foreign policy. Thus, her opposition to war reflected a deeper understanding of the linkage between war and poverty, rather than opposition to the Vietnam War specifically.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Florence Reece, "A New Recipe," Ron Stanford, Interview with Florence and Sam Reece, Florence and Sam Reece Recording Project, AFS 14,588-14,589, Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁵⁶ Stanford, Interview with Florence and Sam Reece.

Aunt Molly Jackson, Sarah Ogan Gunning, and Florence Reece all composed and performed songs that offered multiple meanings and narratives. However, their immediate purpose in writing lyrics and performing their songs focused on the need to organize miners. Their songs urged coal miners to organize and fight the political, social, and economic power held by coal operators. At the same time, their lyrics often expressed working-class consciousness that transcended their specific experiences in the coalfields. This understanding of the broader meaning of working-class solidarity can be seen in Reece's anti-war sentiments, as well as in Jackson's critique of exploitation generally in "The Dishonest Miller." It can be further gleaned from lyrics that referred more broadly to workers rather than to miners specifically. Likewise, Jackson's and Reece's support for interracial unionism and critiques of white working-class racism demonstrated a sense of working-class solidarity that crossed both racial and occupational lines. However, they also demonstrated that working-class consciousness can be complex, inconsistent, and amorphous. While Gunning began her career as a singer by castigating capitalism as a system that had exploited and devastated her family and community, she eventually distanced herself from anti-capitalist rhetoric and introduced more religious songs into her performances. In this way, Gunning's political trajectory followed that of Harlan County's miners in the 1930s. While she remained a lifelong adherent to the belief that miners, and working-class people generally, should unionize and fight for their rights, she eventually rejected the Communist leanings of the NMU. This contrasted with Jackson, who maintained ties with New York City's leftists throughout her stay in the city. Likewise, Reece's work with the Highlander Folk School and work with Henry Wallace's 1948 campaign for president signaled a support for leftist, although not Communist, causes. The differing political trajectories of Jackson, Gunning, and Reece demonstrated that Appalachian women's labor activism did not fit

into a single category. Although all three women wrote songs with similar themes, the diversity of political views they expressed signified the ideological diversity among Appalachian labor activists and working-class women during the Great Depression and beyond.

CHAPTER THREE

“I AM A UNION WOMAN”: MUSIC AND WOMANHOOD IN THE HARLAN COUNTY WAR

While Aunt Molly Jackson, Sarah Ogan Gunning, and Florence Reece all emphasized unionizing efforts and the importance of working-class solidarity in their work, each also composed songs that revealed gendered perspectives on the coal wars, women’s roles in working-class movements, and family relationships. While many of their songs decried the effects that low wages, dangerous working conditions, and poor housing and diets had on working-class people generally, they often specifically mourned the negative impact the mining industry had on miners’ wives and children. Jackson, Gunning, and Reece drew on what labor historians, such as Alice Kessler-Harris, Dorothy Sue Cobble, and Jessica Wilkerson, have termed reproductive labor, defined as the childrearing and domestic labor that patriarchal societies demand women perform.¹ Wilkerson especially identifies what she terms caregiving as the central factor in Appalachian women’s activism. She argues that activists understood caregiving as extending to their communities, and they identified the caregiver role as an important marker of citizenship. She further argues that the idea of caregiving, in both their homes and in their communities, proved especially salient to coalfield women, since they often had few opportunities to obtain paid work until the 1970s.² Jackson, Gunning, and Reece all recognized the importance of women’s childbearing and domestic labor to the maintenance of

¹ See Alice Kessler-Harris, *Gendering Labor History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007); Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women’s Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Jessica Wilkerson, *To Live Here You Have to Fight: How Women Led Appalachian Movements for Social Justice* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press: 2019).

² Wilkerson, *To Live Here You Have to Fight*, 4-6.

coal camp economies. Although women could not work in the mines and could access only limited paid economic opportunities in mining towns, their work ensured that households could function in adverse circumstances, which in turn ensured the survival and productivity of the mining industry. For many, caregiving and reproductive labor contributed to an understanding of the coal wars that centered mining's impact on families. Coalfield women frequently stated children's suffering as the primary reason for their activism. Jackson, Gunning, and Reece likewise offered an interpretation of labor and gender relations in the coalfields that relied on a conception of working-class identity and politics that transcended what they viewed as the artificial divide between paid and unpaid labor. Thus, when Gunning called on miners to, "Make this a land of freedom for workers like you and me," she intended for her audience to take her status as a worker-and not just someone from the working-class-literally.³

Jackson, Gunning, and Reece all wrote songs that blended working-class sentiments with gendered perspectives on working-class politics. In "Hungry Ragged Blues," Jackson exhorted her male listeners to stop work until they got a living wage, but she also offered the image of their families' suffering to convince them of the need to go on strike. Her lyrics emphasized a mother's anger at children's poverty and hunger. She lamented that, "All the women in the coal camps are sitting with bowed down heads/Ragged and bare-footed, and the children crying for bread."⁴ By offering a poignant image of starving children and distraught mothers, Jackson drew attention to mining families' plight in a way that resonated with miners who understood well the

³ Sarah Ogan Gunning, "Come All You Coal Miners," Recorded 13 November, 1937, Alan Lomax and Mary Elizabeth Barnicle Collection, AFC 1938/008, American Folklife Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁴ Aunt Molly Jackson and John Greenway, "Hungry Ragged Blues," *The Songs and Stories of Aunt Molly Jackson*, Folkways Records, FH 5457, 1961, Smithsonian Institute, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings.

dire circumstances their families had suffered through during the early years of the Great Depression.

Like Jackson, Gunning argued that labor unions offered protection from poverty and starvation for miners' families. Her songs revealed a deep commitment to unionization for the benefits labor unions could provide to workers and their families. In "I'm Going to Organize, Baby Mine," she sang, "I'm goin' to lead the workers/For I sure can't be a shirker/Oh, I'm going to lead the workers, baby mine."⁵ Gunning continued, "These are miners' chilluns and wives/I'm compelled to save their lives/So I'm goin' to organize, baby mine."⁶ By emphasizing miners' families, Gunning centered caregiving as the primary force behind her activism and placed miners' wives and children as the people most victimized by the coal industry. By extending her understanding of caregiving to her community, Gunning confirmed Wilkerson's analysis of coalfield women's activism.⁷ When she stated that she felt compelled to save their lives, Gunning pulled from her personal experiences, including the deaths of two of her children to malnutrition at the height of the economic misery caused in Harlan County by the Great Depression.

Like her sister, Gunning wrote new lyrics for melodies familiar to her audiences. By writing new lyrics that incorporated working-class maternal politics, Gunning centered a gendered perspective of the coal wars and exploitation in her reformulations of traditional and popular songs. Her song, "I am a Girl of Constant Sorrow," used the tune and verse structure of the popular song, "I am a Man of Constant Sorrow." After an opening verse that nearly

⁵ Sarah Ogan Gunning, "I'm Going to Organize, Baby Mine," Recorded 13 November, 1937, Alan Lomax and Mary Elizabeth Barnicle Collection, AFC 1938/008, American Folklife Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁶ Gunning, "I'm Going to Organize, Baby Mine."

⁷ Wilkerson, *To Live Here You Have to Fight*, 4-6.

replicated the opening of the original song, Gunning related the story of her decision to leave Kentucky. When she sang, “My mother, how I hated to leave her/Mother dear who now is dead/But I had to go and leave her/So my children could have bread,” she expressed her resentment at the economic conditions that forced her to leave both her human mother and her figurative “mother,” Kentucky.⁸ She went on to sing about the few food options available to miners and their families, lamenting the meals of “bulldog gravy” and beans and bread that could not meet their dietary needs and contributed to the spread of disease and death that accompanied the layoffs and shortened hours in Harlan County coal mines in 1931.⁹ While the song also demonstrated the sympathy Gunning felt for the miners themselves, her decision to leave Kentucky reflected the pain coalfield mothers felt when they saw their children suffering from want of food.

Jackson, Gunning, and Reece were not the only women in Harlan County who openly supported the NMU. Viola Grace, in her interviews with the Dreiser Committee, proudly espoused her beliefs and claimed membership in the NMU. “I belong to it; I am working in the capacity of anything on earth I can do to relieve these poor, starving people.”¹⁰ Another woman, also interviewed in Harlan, described her husband as a union member. Unnamed because she did not want to expose her husband to violence, she discussed the impoverished conditions prevailing in Harlan County’s company towns. When asked what she prepared for breakfast, she replied that she typically made, “A little cooked pumpkin and what you folks call white meat,

⁸ Sarah Ogan Gunning, “I am a Girl of Constant Sorrow,” Recorded 13 November, 1937, Alan Lomax and Mary Elizabeth Barnicle Collection, AFC 1938/008, American Folklife Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁹ Gunning, “I am a Girl of Constant Sorrow.”

¹⁰ Theodore Dreiser et al., *Harlan Miners Speak: Report on Terrorism in the Kentucky Coal Fields Prepared by Members of the of the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1970), 226.

just fat white bacon, and that's what he (her husband) took in the mines to eat and work on and he had water gravy for breakfast and black coffee." When asked what she gave to her children, she replied, "They had the same breakfast and they don't get no dinner."¹¹ This unnamed woman's report confirmed the dire conditions described by Jackson, Gunning, and Reece in many of their songs. The hopelessness depicted in "Hungry Ragged Blues" broke through in the woman's testimony, in which she admitted that if her husband lost his job, the family would have no choice but to rely on the scanty system of public welfare existing in Harlan County.¹²

Jackson's songs can be roughly categorized into two distinct, yet often overlapping, themes, both of which drew on the working-class maternal politics that she emphasized in her pathos-filled depictions of starving women and children victimized by coal operators' incessant greed. Jackson wrote lyrics that at times celebrated the use of violence as a tool to force coal companies to recognize the NMU (later the UMWA), restore civil liberties, and improve working conditions. At the same time, she also wrote plaintive songs that spoke of the hardships that poor wages and working conditions inflicted on working-class families and reminded miners of why they had to face danger on the picket line in the first place. First, such songs as "The Death of Harry Simms" and "Pistol-Packin' Woman," took belligerent stands, explicitly or implicitly calling on miners to pick up their guns and fight their employers. Considering the long legacy of violence between coal operators and their employees, such calls to violence do not appear atypical. Scores of people died in gun battles in West Virginia and Kentucky from 1910 to 1940, and violence also broke out in other mining communities nationwide during the same period. Jackson's gendered perspective on the coal industry set her work apart, and her apparent

¹¹ Dreiser et al., *Harlan Miners Speak*, 154.

¹² *Ibid.*, 155-159.

disavowal of contemporary gender roles and norms demonstrated her personal commitment to organization by any means necessary. Jackson not only encouraged violence when necessary, but also celebrated her own claimed role in the coal wars. While “Pistol-Packin’ Woman” did not explicitly mention the Harlan County War or any violence between coal operators and miners, its depiction of women engaging in violence to regulate community morals would have shocked sensitive ears still familiar with contemporary gender ideals of servile, soft-spoken women. Jackson’s third-person reference to herself portrayed her as a defender of community and family values. She sang, “Then my cousin Molly/Put her husband on the run/She chased him home to his children/And broke up his drinkin’ fun.”¹³ While the references to violence may seem antithetical to community values, Jackson lived in a society in which the normal boundaries of conduct had been upended by the interminable conflict between coal operators and miners. Certainly, Jackson filled “Pistol-Packin’ Woman” with hyperbole. However, in its depictions of violence as a tool to police the community and force errant miners to fulfill their duties, listeners could draw connections to workers’ struggles with their employers. Additionally, the song built on Jackson’s frequent exhortations to miners to organize for their families’ sakes. In her songs that either encouraged violence or recognized its inevitability, Jackson did not depart from working-class maternal politics. Instead, her version of maternal politics incorporated violence as a potentially necessary component of the struggle to improve working conditions for the sakes of miners’ families.

The other trend in Jackson’s songs emphasized the misery and desperation that the coal industry had inflicted on miners and their families. In contrast to Jackson’s songs encouraging

¹³ Aunt Molly Jackson and John Greenway, “Pistol-Packin’ Woman,” *The Songs and Stories of Aunt Molly Jackson*, Folkways Records, FH 5457, 1961, Smithsonian Institute, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings.

militancy, these songs offered plaintive, painful reminders of the consequences that would ensue for Harlan County's working-class children if miners did not organize. Jackson's community role as a midwife exposed her to the effects of poverty on children. In her song, "Dreadful Memories," she offered a mournful eulogy to the many children she had personally seen die during the misery-stricken year of 1931. Remembering the circumstances that led her to compose the lyrics, she told John Greenway, "I had to nurse all the little children till the last breath left them...Thirty-seven babies died in my arms in the last three months of 1931. Their little stomachs burst open; they was mortified inside. Oh, what an awful way for a baby to die."¹⁴ For Jackson, intense sadness blended with anger, since she knew that not everyone in Harlan County suffered the way the children she cared for did. In the song, she drew a sharp line between miners' children and operators' children. She reminded her listeners that, "I can't forget them coal miners' children/They starved to death for want of milk;/While the coal operators and their wives and their children/Were all dressed in jewels and silk."¹⁵ While "Dreadful Memories" offered no prescription for alleviating the suffering it described, when considered in the context of Jackson's more militant songs, it provided miners with a crucial reminder of why they had resorted to violence. Further, it established Jackson's maternal politics as a distinctly working-class variant. Thus, the two trends in Jackson's work, while appearing dissimilar at first glance, complemented one another and offered listeners a complex portrait of the motivations for violence and its effects. Both utilized working-class maternal politics, demonstrating the various ways in which motherhood could be applied in activism.

¹⁴ Aunt Molly Jackson and John Greenway, "Dreadful Memories," *The Songs and Stories of Aunt Molly Jackson, Folkways Records*, FH 5457, 1961, Smithsonian Institute, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings.

¹⁵ Jackson and Greenway, "Dreadful Memories."

Jackson's songs implicitly emphasized the hardships that working-class women faced, both in the form of domestic labor essential to maintaining mining communities and the heartbreak caused by the harsh living conditions mining families faced during the Great Depression. By distinguishing between miners' wives and coal operators' wives, Jackson offered a definition of womanhood that conflicted with that put forward by wealthy women. By describing coal operators' wives as women who did not face hardships, Jackson expressed a working-class femininity that subscribed to different values than the residual Victorian ideals claimed by affluent women. Thus, while Jackson's assertions in "Pistol Packin' Woman" would have seemed alien to the upper-class women she condemned in "Dreadful Memories," her support for violent action did not detract from her womanhood.

Many Harlan County women expressed a deep concern over safety in the mines. In "Poor Miner's Farewell," Jackson addressed the emotional and material disaster a miner's death inflicted on his family. However, Jackson did not frequently discuss safety in her songs. Even when miners' deaths featured in her songs, their deaths were treated in a surprisingly matter-of-fact way if they died in the course of work.¹⁶ By contrast, her songs took on a much more militant tone when she discussed miners and their supporters who had been killed in gunfights with company guards or police. In *Coal Miners' Wives*, Carol A.B. Giesen discusses the coping mechanisms adopted by miners' wives and their families in the face of persistent mining accidents. Many of the women she interviewed admitted that they worried about their husbands' safety, but they found a variety of ways to avoid the overwhelming burden of constant worry. Giesen argues that people in the coalfields realized that mining could not be made entirely safe,

¹⁶ Aunt Molly Jackson and John Greenway, "Poor Miner's Farewell," *The Songs and Stories of Aunt Molly Jackson, Folkways Records*, FH 5457, 1961, Smithsonian Institute, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings.

even as they frequently worked to make mining safer.¹⁷ For many people in the coalfields, accepting the inherent danger in the mines came with the job. When interviewed by Billy Faier in 1958, Jackson discussed the death of her stepson, who had died in a mining accident in 1945. While she did mention the wife and five children he left behind, she did not attack the coal operators for his death, despite her frequent condemnations of them in her songs.¹⁸ This did not mean that Jackson did not mourn the loss of her stepson. Instead, like the women discussed by Giesen, she understood the dangers inherent to mining and reserved her sharpest criticisms for when operators engaged in blatant exploitation.

Jackson and Gunning both encouraged other women to become involved in the movement to organize Harlan County miners. In “I am a Union Woman,” Jackson described herself as a staunch union supporter. Further, she claimed a position in the labor movement that emphasized the crucial importance of women’s activism and defied any approach to class consciousness that called on women to take a subordinate role in the struggle to organize workers. The song also demonstrated a sense of independence when she sang about her husband’s inability to find a job because of her activism. Rather than renounce her activism, Jackson continued to argue for unionization. By doing so, she signaled that her commitment to organizing workers outweighed the impact her activism had on her husband’s ability to find work.¹⁹ Gunning, in “I’m Going to Organize, Baby Mine,” explicitly stated her sense of herself as a labor organizer. While she actually did less organizing work than her sister, Gunning still

¹⁷ Carol A.B. Giesen, *Coal Miners’ Wives: Portraits of Endurance* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1995), 40-62.

¹⁸ Aunt Molly Jackson, Interview with Billy Faier, Billy Faier Collection 20380, Folder 67, Southern Folklife Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

¹⁹ Aunt Molly Jackson and John Greenway, “I am a Union Woman,” *The Songs and Stories of Aunt Molly Jackson, Folkways Records*, FH 5457, 1961, Smithsonian Institute, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings.

expressed her commitment to solidarity, and the song demonstrated her belief that women had important roles to play in organizing miners.²⁰

In their most famous songs, Jackson, Gunning, and Reece primarily focused on miners' struggles and the impacts those struggles had on coalfield women, but they also wrote songs that expressed their views on womanhood and equality. In a 1971 interview, Reece performed a song she called "Ragweed." In the song, she criticized the demands that husbands and children made on working-class mothers. She sang, "My husband he's the big bad chief/My children second best/-'Ragweed do this, Ragweed do that' -/I never get no rest."²¹ Despite centering the needs of miners' families in her labor songs, Reece critiqued patriarchal demands for hard-working and submissive wives. She finished by singing, "The time is coming soon/I feel it in the air/They'll call on old Ragweed and/Old Ragweed won't be there."²² The ambiguous ending could refer either to her death or her refusal to continue doing work without respect and just compensation. Regardless, the song demonstrated Reece's belief that patriarchal gender roles restricted the opportunities available for women. While she continued to argue for unionization and pro-worker government policies and based her argument in her concern for working-class women and children, she also called on working-class men to recognize the importance of reproductive labor.

Jackson's life and songs reflected a gendered perspective of the coal wars and working-class consciousness. Her lyrics often emphasized the unique consequences of industrialization

²⁰ Sarah Ogan Gunning, "I'm Going to Organize, Baby Mine," Recorded 13 November, 1937, Alan Lomax and Mary Elizabeth Barnicle Collection, AFC 1938/008, American Folklife.

²¹ Florence Reece, "Ragweed," Ron Stanford, Interview with Florence and Sam Reece, Florence and Sam Reece Recording Project, AFS 14,588-14,589, Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

²² Reece, "Ragweed."

for women, and she implicitly and explicitly called on women to take part in the struggle to organize workers. “Hungry Ragged Blues” could have represented the thoughts and fears of many women in Harlan County in 1931, and it would have likely resonated with many working-class women throughout the United States. In her lyrics, she appealed to working-class women who could relate to her own experiences of poverty and uncertainty.²³ Temma Kaplan, in her analysis of working-class women’s activism in Barcelona in the early twentieth century, argued that women could utilize patriarchal definitions of women’s proper roles in society to make demands on the state.²⁴ While Harlan County women did not directly make demands on the state in 1931, their activism touched on workers’ relationship to the state. After Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s election in 1932, union supporters became more closely wedded to government action. Furthermore, the power that coal operators had over local governments, as well as Kentucky’s state government, blurred the lines between activism that targeted private employers and demands made on the state. Like the women Kaplan discussed, most women in the coalfields did not work for pay, but coal towns could not function without the work they performed. Jackson’s depiction of women unable to provide for their children implicitly accused coal operators of failing to uphold the patriarchal values they claimed to cherish. In combination with the militancy expressed in songs like “Pistol-Packin’ Woman,” this attack on coal country capitalism encouraged women to take part in the militancy that Jackson believed was necessary to unionize the coalfields and improve the standard of living for miners and their families. Like many other working-class women whose contributions to the capitalist economy consisted

²³ Aunt Molly Jackson and John Greenway, “Hungry Ragged Blues,” *The Songs and Stories of Aunt Molly Jackson*, Folkways Records, FH 5457, 1961, Smithsonian Institute, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings.

²⁴ Temma Kaplan, “Female Consciousness and Collective Action: The Case of Barcelona, 1910-1918,” *Signs* 7, no. 3, Feminist Theory (Spring, 1982), 545-566.

primarily of reproductive labor rather than paid labor, Jackson challenged patriarchal definitions of gender roles at the same time that her arguments acknowledged and seemingly accepted them.

Kaplan's analysis focused on women who demanded greater attention to families' economic needs from the state. While she also discussed female workers who demanded equal access to the jobs and state support granted to men, she largely analyzed women who did not work for pay outside their homes. These women did not overtly challenge the state's patriarchal expectations of obedient wives, but they also demanded that the state meet their needs. By resorting to political action, women in Barcelona challenged the patriarchal expectation of silent women. While they did not necessarily demand jobs or rights regarded in Spanish society as belonging to men, their entrance into the political realm through collective action demonstrated the opportunities available to working-class women even within patriarchal societies.²⁵

Much like the women who did not hold paid jobs that Kaplan analyzed, Jackson, Gunning, and Reece did not submit to patriarchal expectations, even as they focused primarily on the needs of working-class mothers and children. Jackson's claim that she personally took part in violent actions to combat coal operators and their hired guards may have been exaggerated, but it also demonstrated the discrepancy between her actions and the gender roles prescribed for women in the early twentieth century. Her advocacy for violence in "Pistol Packin' Woman" as a potential necessity likewise challenged the patriarchal preference for submissive women, but the song also prescribed violence primarily as a response to behavior that threatened the wellbeing of women and children. Thus, Jackson challenged gender roles while still adhering to certain contemporary expectations of working-class women. This does not diminish the force of her activism. While defining herself as working-class, Jackson also defined herself as a woman, and

²⁵ Ibid., 545-566.

she operated, to an extent, within the gender ideology common to her time. Her decision to commit to political advocacy and even violence, however, complicates the image of womanhood during the Great Depression. By defining herself as a woman and emphasizing the specific needs of miners' wives and children, Jackson did not radically depart from gender roles that prescribed the home as woman's domain. However, by entering the political realm to protest poor working and living conditions, and doing so in the face of her husband's opposition, she challenged a narrow conception of women's proper roles in Appalachian politics.

Unlike Jackson, neither Gunning nor Reece wrote songs that explicitly celebrated the use of violence to maintain a moral economy. Both Gunning and Reece, however, challenged patriarchal expectations by advocating for unionization and engaging in political activism. While Gunning did less overtly political work than either Jackson or Reece, her songs took strong stands against coal operators and emphasized women's role in the labor movement. When she sang about organizing workers, she expressed a deep personal commitment to organized labor. While she did not write as many overtly political songs as her sister and did not become involved in political advocacy that continued for decades after the Great Depression like Reece, her early work reflected an understanding that working-class women had a significant role to play in the labor movement. Reece remains famous primarily for "Which Side Are You On?," and she did not write any other songs that reached the same level of popularity. However, the sentiments she expressed in that song demonstrated her own commitment to political action, and her activities corroborate Kaplan's argument that working-class women challenged patriarchy by organizing politically, even when their demands seemed to reflect patriarchal expectations of motherhood.

Jackson and Reece, and Gunning to a lesser extent, engaged in political activities after they left Harlan County. An article in the *New York Times*, written in 1960 shortly after her

death, described Jackson as, “The original ‘Pistol Packin’ Mama,” and stated that, “Leftists, who made the Harlan County strike their cause, enlisted Mrs. Jackson to sing at their rallies.”²⁶ This political activity, corroborated by reports from the New York press in the 1930s, complicates the notions about working-class women’s politics presented by Kaplan. The women she analyzed who did not work outside their homes for pay generally avoided political activism once the state met their demands. While women workers continued to advocate for change through labor organizations and political parties, their alliance with women who primarily performed domestic labor did not create a lasting partnership.²⁷ Even after Harlan County miners organized with the protection of the state, Jackson and Reece continued to advocate for change outside Harlan County. Reece’s involvement with the Highlander Folk School, along with her participation in Henry Wallace’s 1948 run for president, demonstrated that her commitment to change transcended her immediate demands in 1931.²⁸ By contrast, while Gunning did make some political connections during her years in New York City, she largely eschewed politics in the decades after the 1930s.

Despite their political differences and the diverging ways in which they pursued activism, Jackson, Gunning, and Reece each defined their activism as a distinctive aspect of their womanhood. However, their definitions of womanhood differed, and the differences could at times lead to conflict. While Gunning and Jackson shared the experience of relocating to New York City, Gunning exhibited a hostility toward her sister that often seemed to extend beyond

²⁶ “Aunt Molly Jackson, 80, Dead; Original ‘Pistol Packin’ Mama’,” *New York Times*, September 3, 1960.

²⁷ Kaplan, “Female Consciousness and Collective Action,” 545-566.

²⁸ Ron Stanford, Interview with Florence and Sam Reece, Florence and Sam Reece Recording Project, AFS 14,588-14,589, Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

personal antipathy. While Romalis discussed Gunning's dislike of her sister as one emanating from personal conflicts that began in Kentucky and deepened while they lived together in New York, their fraught relationship seems to have also resulted in part from disagreements over the justification and meaning of their move to New York. In the song that Gunning sang for Mary Barnicle (discussed in Chapter One), Gunning sang, "She has a husband down in Kentucky/And if she ain't sent back, she'll sure be lucky/She's mean, I mean/She's the sneakingest thing that ever you seen."²⁹ Here, Gunning combined attacks that originated from a sense that her sister had wronged her with a critique of Jackson's move to New York. While Gunning justified her move by arguing that moving to New York allowed her to remove her children from the violence and hunger in Harlan County, she did not believe that Jackson had the same excuse. In her songs, "I hate the Capitalist System," Gunning sang, "Oh, yes, I guess you wonder/What they have done to me/I'm going to tell you/My husband had TB/Brought on by hard work and low wages/And not enough to eat."³⁰ Whereas the health and wellbeing of her husband and children drove Gunning to leave her home in Kentucky, Jackson chose to move to New York despite still having a living husband in Harlan County. This suggests a conflict between the two sisters over the meaning of womanhood and community loyalty. Gunning mourned her move to New York as a personal loss that required her to leave behind her "mother," meaning both the grave of her birth mother and her Kentucky homeland. She expressed regret at the necessity of the move, even as she felt that she had no other choice.³¹ In Gunning's view, Jackson's decision to move

²⁹ Sarah Ogan Gunning, *Field Recordings Conducted by Mary Elizabeth Barnicle*, New York City, 1939, Mary Elizabeth Barnicle and Tillman Cadle Collection, AppMs-347, Subgroup II, Series G, Box 14, Archives of Appalachia, East Tennessee State University.

³⁰ Sarah Ogan Gunning, "I Hate the Capitalist System," Recorded 13 November, 1937, Alan Lomax and Mary Elizabeth Barnicle Collection, AFC 1938/008, American Folklife Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

³¹ Gunning, "I am a Girl of Constant Sorrow."

appeared to reject the community that the former mourned. Additionally, the specific criticism of Jackson's decision to leave her husband for New York suggested that Gunning disapproved of what she defined as a lapse of judgement and loyalty. This speaks to the differing understandings of womanhood and community that brought Gunning and Jackson to New York.

When Jackson celebrated her claimed use of violence in "Pistol Packin' Mama," she challenged patriarchal concepts of femininity to a degree that Gunning and Reece did not. The latter two viewed violence as a necessary evil to combat repression. When Reece asked miners, "Will you be a gun thug/Or will you be a man?," she recognized that violence would result from confrontations between company guards, sheriff's deputies, and union supporters.³² However, the song did not explicitly call for violence, and Reece instead suggested that armed conflict should be blamed on "gun thugs" rather than on the miners. Even Harlan County women who did not support union organization efforts placed more blame on coal operators than miners. When Nannie Powers described company guards as "thugs" during her interview with Theodore Dreiser, she expressed her distaste for coal operators and the tactics they used to prevent miners from organizing. By contrast, she primarily criticized the NMU by characterizing it as an organization that would not bring real progress to the coalfields. Her lack of interest in labor unions thus reflected a sense of disillusionment rather than hostility.³³

Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, in her analysis of female textile workers in Elizabethton, Tennessee, interrogated Appalachian concepts of womanhood and femininity. While women

³² Reece, "Which Side Are You On?," Performed by Jim Garland, Recorded 13 November, 1937, Alan Lomax and Mary Elizabeth Barnicle Collection, AFC 1938/008, American Folklife Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

³³ Theodore Dreiser et al., *Harlan Miners Speak: Report on Terrorism in the Kentucky Coal Fields Prepared by Members of the of the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1970), 161.

textile workers came primarily from the nearby mountains, they also engaged in behavior anathema to conservative business and religious leaders, who viewed their adoption of certain elements of Jazz Age dress and sexuality as a threat to community mores. Their conflict with their employers, which did not reach the same level of violence as contemporary events in Gastonia and elsewhere throughout the Piedmont, still marked them as “disorderly women.” To an extent, some relished this designation, even as they relied on gendered stereotypes to avoid legal penalties after several confrontations between strikers, strikebreakers, and the National Guard. Other strikers, especially those with families to support, rejected the “disorderly women” label and drew instead on working-class maternal politics to associate their demands with their children’s needs. The differences between these two groups of activists, who united to protest poor working conditions and wages, demonstrate some of the complexities and nuances of Appalachian women’s labor activism. While working-class women agreed on the need to unite to improve working conditions and standards of living, they often differed on the conduct, meaning, and outcomes of working-class activism.³⁴

Jackson, Gunning, and Reece represented different sides of this argument. Jackson, as represented by “Pistol Packin’ Woman,” relished the idea of working-class women behaving in ways that conflicted with contemporary gender norms.³⁵ However, her behavior, style of dress, and arguments differed from those utilized by the textile workers described by Hall. When the *New York Times* wrote about Jackson during her time in New York City, they depicted her in stereotypical mountain garb.³⁶ While Jackson primarily donned this style of clothing for public

³⁴ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “Disorderly Women: Gender and Labor Militancy in the Appalachian South,” *The Journal of American History* 73, no. 2 (September, 1986), 354-382.

³⁵ Jackson and Greenway, “Pistol Packin’ Woman.”

³⁶ “Mountaineer Woman Sings Ballads Here,” *New York Times*, November 21, 1935.

appearances to accentuate the popular portrayal of her as an Appalachian woman, she did not transgress contemporary understandings of women's "proper" clothing like the young Jazz Age women in Elizabethton did. This can likely be attributed to the difference in Jackson's age compared to the younger, unmarried women who worked in the textile industry, but Jackson also consistently justified her "disorderly" behavior as necessary to combat repression and public apathy. Her name appeared in a *New York Times* article detailing a clash between Kentucky coal miners and event organizers during a rally ostensibly intended to benefit Harlan County strikers. When denied the opportunity to speak on the issues that directly impacted her life and the lives of those around her, Jackson took part in what the paper described as a near-riot. While anti-leftist bias may have played a role in the paper's unflattering depiction of Jackson and her compatriots, they only decided to resort to loud opposition to the event's proceedings when they felt that organizers did not recognize their perspective on the issues that impacted their lives. Unlike the unmarried textile workers analyzed by Hall, Jackson relied primarily on working-class maternal politics to combat coal operators. While both Jackson and unmarried textile workers in Elizabethton utilized confrontational tactics and rhetoric to argue in favor of unionization and better working conditions, the latter did not draw on maternalism. Married female textile workers did argue that their status as mothers, or potential mothers, justified a union presence and higher wages, but they often rejected confrontation and criticized the depiction of female strikers as "disorderly women".³⁷ Thus, Jackson's life and activism partially aligned with the concept of "disorderly women" that Hall explored, in that she utilized confrontational tactics and even condoned violence when she deemed it necessary.³⁸ However,

³⁷ Hall, "Disorderly Women," 354-382.

³⁸ Shelly Romalis, *Pistol Packin' Mama: Aunt Molly Jackson and the Politics of Folksong* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 180-182.

by relying primarily on working-class maternal politics in her arguments for unionization, she differed from the unmarried workers at the Elizabethton mills. These differences and similarities demonstrate the complexities of Appalachian women's labor activism, especially when compared to the stances taken by Gunning and Reece.

While Gunning's lyrical content often did not greatly differ from her sister's, her political stances suggested a different approach to activism. When Gunning criticized her sister's decision to leave her husband in Kentucky, she drew on a concept of femininity that emphasized spousal loyalty and a sharp dichotomy between the workplace and the home. This at first seems paradoxical, since Gunning explicitly claimed the title of worker in "Come All You Coal Miners."³⁹ Additionally, the act of engaging in political protest conflicted with the notion that women should restrict their activities to the domestic sphere. Of the three women discussed in this thesis, Gunning held the most complex political and social beliefs. While she drew on her experiences as a working-class woman in Harlan County and condemned the coal industry for the suffering inflicted upon her and her family, she did not participate in political activity to the same degree that Jackson and Reece did. The differences between her and the latter two reveal the deep complexities involved in working-class women's labor activism during the Great Depression. When they vocally protested the effects that low wages and poor working conditions had on their families, all three women rejected a gender ideology that narrowly confined them to the domestic sphere. However, by focusing primarily on the impact poor working conditions had on miners' wives and children, their works did not transgress contemporary gender roles to the same extent that future generations of labor feminists, who demanded equal access to jobs and

³⁹ Gunning, "Come All You Coal Miners."

equal pay for equal work, did.⁴⁰ Gunning, by largely avoiding political activity outside of actions on behalf of coal miners, represented one aspect of Appalachian women's labor activism.

Like Jackson, Reece believed that her activism should transcend the immediate concerns of Harlan County. By dedicating herself to activism through the Highlander Folk School, Reece engaged in activity that economic and racial conservatives viewed as disorderly. An article in the *New Journal and Guide*, reporting on the forced closure of the school in 1960, stated, "The school, which sponsors a series of workshops rather than regular semester-style courses, has been under attack since Horton (Myles Horton, the founder of Highlander Folk School) started it in 1932."⁴¹ Maligning it as a radical institution that fostered communism, pro-labor protests, and civil rights demonstrations, conservatives had long sought to close the school. By participating in its programs, especially after the school made clear its commitment to equal rights for African Americans in the South, Reece demonstrated a desire for political change that aligned her more with Jackson than with Gunning. However, by choosing to remain in Appalachia and committing herself to advocating for change there, Reece maintained a different focus than Jackson. While Jackson ultimately became more famous than Reece, due to her relocation to New York City, Reece remained closer to home and emphasized the needs of workers in Appalachia and the South.

Jackson and Reece especially challenged Southern gender norms by encouraging interracial unionism. While scholars view Jackson as a person prone to self-aggrandizement, her claim that she confronted a white man in Florida for assaulting an African American man

⁴⁰ Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 3-10.

⁴¹ "Judge Orders Highlander Folk School to 'Close'," *New Journal and Guide*, 20 February, 1960.

undermined the Jim Crow racial order, in which white women and Black men were supposed to have as little contact as possible.⁴² Reece, by stating that she would rather have her daughter marry a Black man than a strikebreaker, further undermined the Southern racial hierarchy by scoffing at one of its strongest taboos.⁴³ In an era before the Supreme Court's decision in *Loving v. Virginia*, white supremacists used the threat of interracial marriage to organize Southern whites against the Civil Rights Movement. Reece's statement thus defined her as someone who challenged the Southern racial and gender orders.

While Kentucky did not have as many lynchings as states in the Deep South, racism and racial violence impacted the state. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, national newspapers reported sporadically on lynchings in Kentucky. One article, published in 1926 in *The Chicago Defender*, stated that a Kentucky court had found the state liable for the lynching death of a Black man accused of killing a white man. As a result of the lawsuit, the state had to pay the victim's family \$2,000.⁴⁴ In 1934, an article in *The Washington Post* reported on the shooting of a state legislator in Kentucky known for his opposition to lynching. While the article stated that the legislator had been robbed and that no assailant had been apprehended, he strongly believed that he had been attacked for his stance against lynching.⁴⁵ While neither of these incidents took place in eastern Kentucky, other outbreaks of racist violence occurred in the coalfields. In 1927, a white mob from Virginia invaded Kentucky and forcibly seized an African American man accused of killing a white mine foreman in Fleming, Kentucky from the Letcher

⁴² John Greenway, *American Folksongs of Protest* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1953), 258.

⁴³ Stanford, Interview with Florence and Sam Reece.

⁴⁴ "Kentucky to Pay \$2,000 for Lynching," *The Chicago Defender*, 20 November, 1926.

⁴⁵ "Thugs Shoot Legislator, Kentucky Lynching Foe," *The Washington Post*, 22 March, 1934.

County Jail. They then took the man across the border into Virginia and lynched him.⁴⁶ A subsequent article in the *Baltimore Afro-American* revealed that women comprised half of the suspects that had participated in the lynching.⁴⁷ This event took place in the county immediately northeast of Harlan County, signifying that racist violence impacted eastern Kentucky, as well as the central Bluegrass region of the state. Another lynching took place in Hazard, Kentucky, just north of Harlan County, in 1934.⁴⁸ While these lynchings, along with the fact that Black people constituted nearly ten percent of Harlan County's mine workforce, call into question Jackson's claim that she was unaware of Jim Crow racial strictures before she moved to Florida, they also demonstrate the systemic racial violence that existed during her time in Kentucky. While their alliances with Black workers and civil rights leaders largely arose from the need to craft an interracial partnership for labor rights, Jackson and Reece subverted Southern racial and gender ideology, as well as local laws and customs, by rejecting Jim Crow's prohibition of contact between white women and Black men.

Jackson, Gunning, and Reece all drew on gendered conceptions of labor and protest in their songs, and all three argued from a position that emphasized working-class maternal politics. By focusing on the particular needs of miners' wives and children, they drew attention to the discrepancy between gender ideology that called on women to stay in the home and the realities faced by working-class women. As Mary Triece argued in *On the Picket Line*, "The reality facing countless families of the working poor stood in startling contrast to images of the family

⁴⁶ "Virginia Mob Accused of Kentucky Lynching," *Washington Post*, 1 December, 1927.

⁴⁷ "Lynching Mob Half Women," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 10 December, 1927.

⁴⁸ "Threaten to 'Blow Up Town' After Kentucky Lynching," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, 3 February, 1934.

that evoked privacy, warmth, and repose.”⁴⁹ By contrasting their experiences with those of more affluent women, they argued for policies that would make the popular concept of the home as a warm refuge more attainable for working-class people. At the same time, they transgressed gender norms and argued that women had a role to play in organizing workers and fighting for civil liberties and better working conditions. By organizing with Black men, Jackson and Reece broke with the Southern racial hierarchy that emphasized separation, especially between Black men and white women. All three had at least passing connections with the Communist Party through the NMU, and they all experienced the violence that tore through Harlan County in 1931 first-hand. While they each offered differing conceptions of womanhood and femininity, they all grappled with a system that sought to silence their voices. Their experiences and actions offer important insights into how Appalachian women thought about the intersections of class and gender, and their stories and songs demonstrate the complex and varied beliefs held by working-class Appalachian women during the Great Depression.

⁴⁹ Mary E. Triece, *On the Picket Line: Strategies of Working-Class Women During the Depression* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 35.

CONCLUSION

INTERSECTIONS AND INFLUENCES: CLASS AND GENDER IN HARLAN COUNTY, THE GREAT DEPRESSION AND BEYOND

While Aunt Molly Jackson, Sarah Ogan Gunning, and Florence Reece differed in their political outlooks and commitments, each addressed similar topics and ideas in their songs. For all three, music provided a medium through which they could inspire workers and encourage the unionization campaign that they considered necessary to improve standards of living for Harlan County miners and their families. However, their work meant more to them than expressions of working-class solidarity. Although each defined themselves as working-class people who sought to promote solidarity and unionization through their songwriting, each also wrote songs that expressed a gendered understanding of working-class organization and class conflict. Jackson, Gunning, and Reece all combined multiple identities, and the intersections of these identities allowed them to present an understanding of their experiences through songs that inspired workers and their families while also challenging contemporary gender ideology that called on women to uphold the status quo and avoid leftist political activity.

This thesis has attempted to address three significant points. First, while a face value reading of the lyrics written by Jackson, Gunning, and Reece could lead scholars to focus solely on their utility in the struggle to organize workers, all three women understood their work through the lenses of their multiple identities. They all viewed themselves as workers and women simultaneously. While they did seek to organize workers through their songs, they also sought to claim the title of worker and the dignity due to all workers. Further, each recognized the crucial importance of women's labor to the maintenance of working-class communities and organizations. Second, each utilized a form of working-class maternal politics in her songwriting

and approach to activism. Building on the works of such predecessors as Mother Jones, Jackson, Gunning, and Reece all emphasized the negative impacts that the coal industry's notoriously poor wages and working conditions had on miners' families. Utilizing maternalist rhetoric allowed each to argue for better economic conditions within the framework of contemporary gender ideology. Since coal companies did not hire women to work in the mines, working-class maternal politics offered all three women a valuable tool to advocate for higher wages and improved working conditions. While utilizing contemporary gender norms would seem at first to be a concession to patriarchal expectations, each woman engaged in forms of activism that sharply conflicted with the separate spheres ideology that called on women, especially married women, to avoid paid labor and focus instead on reproductive and domestic labor. By taking part in activism designed to improve working conditions, Jackson, Gunning, and Reece, like other activist women during the Great Depression, went beyond the roles prescribed to them by contemporary society. Finally, this thesis has built on the scholarship concerning the importance of folk music to working-class organization during the Great Depression and beyond. In the Appalachian Mountains, the Carolina Piedmont, New York City, and Detroit, Michigan, workers sang songs that tied pro-labor lyrics to traditional melodies. These songs helped to unite workers behind a common cause by offering them collective emotional experiences designed to reinforce solidarity. At the same time, pro-labor songs often contained multiple meanings. Combining their pro-union sentiments with maternal politics and their claims to the title of worker, Jackson, Gunning, and Reece created songs that linked union organization efforts to a reformulation of working-class identity that recognized the importance of women's labor, whether paid or unpaid.

For historians, as well as other scholars in the humanities and social sciences, the concept of intersectionality offers a crucial tool to understanding the multifaceted nature of how people

have experienced and understood their relationships to power. Historians primarily analyze the ways in which race, class, and gender have interacted and intersected to condition lived experiences. For the white working-class women of Harlan County, the intersection of class and gender meant that they experienced the coal wars differently than Harlan County men did. Race also affected an individual's experience in coal country. African American women, who formed a small but by no means insignificant minority among Harlan County women, suffered from the additional oppression inflicted on them by white supremacy. Further research should be conducted to explore the nature of Black women's engagement with the labor movement in the Appalachian coalfields. Such work would provide a deeper understanding of the intersection of race, class, and gender in this most emblematic of Appalachian industries. Jackson, Gunning, and Reece did not view themselves solely as women, nor did they strictly define themselves as workers. Instead, they emphasized both aspects of their identity, while also incorporating Appalachian culture into their works by using melodies drawn from religious and folk songs that would be immediately recognizable to their listeners.¹

As demonstrated by scholars such as Mary Triece and Alice Kessler-Harris, working-class women in early twentieth century America faced discrimination and hostility within the labor movement. Male workers, seeking to maintain their hold on the workforce, and especially the skilled jobs they deemed theirs by right, sought to prevent women from obtaining positions of power and influence in the labor movement. Thus, white working-class women suffered under the dual burden of classism and sexism, while Black working-class women labored under the

¹ Michele Tracy Berger and Kathleen Guidroz, "Introduction," in *The Intersectional Approach: Transforming the Academy Through Race, Class, and Gender*, ed. Michele Tracy Berger and Kathleen Guidroz (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 1-16.

additional burden of racism.² While the political activity of the three women discussed in this thesis might seem at first to be a repudiation of norms within the labor movement that reduced women's opportunities for involvement, their work had a complicated relationship to gender norms. All three women focused primarily on the impact that poor wages and subpar living conditions had on miners' wives and children. While they also expressed sympathy for the miners who faced dangerous working conditions and fought armed battles with their employers' hired guards and county deputies, miners' struggles often played only a secondary role in their songs. Since women could not work in the mines, miners faced no conflict with women over employment in the coalfields. To an extent, Jackson, Gunning, and Reece continued the work begun by Mother Jones during her organizing drives in West Virginia two decades earlier. Like Jones, they emphasized the improvements in living conditions that unionizing could bring to children, and their songs largely avoided references to the movement for women's rights.³

However, Jackson, Gunning, and Reece differed in a few significant ways from their predecessors. First, while Jackson drew on an image of maternal benevolence reminiscent of Jones, she also engaged in political activity that both drew on and conflicted with Jones's own political work. As an aging widow, Jones had seen no contradiction between her political work and family responsibilities. In contrast to her fervent work on behalf of the labor movement, Jones offered little support to the movement for women's rights, and she seemed ambivalent even on the subject of women's suffrage.⁴ By contrast, Jackson left Harlan County a married

² See Mary E. Triece, *On the Picket Line: Strategies of Working-Class Women During the Depression* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007); Alice Kessler-Harris, *Gendering Labor History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

³ Simon Cordery, *Mother Jones: Raising Cain and Consciousness* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2010), 52-57, 70.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

woman, and her decision to leave her husband behind demonstrated a significant difference between her and Jones. Additionally, while Jones had shown little interest in women's suffrage, Jackson encouraged political participation through voting, as evidenced by her song encouraging Franklin Roosevelt to run for an unprecedented third term as president.⁵

Jackson's life did not represent the only possible political path for working-class women in Harlan County. Her half-sister, Sarah Ogan Gunning, expressed political opinions and attitudes that differed, sometimes sharply, from Jackson's, even as they both focused their anger on the coal industry and condemned coal operators for the suffering they witnessed. Gunning's criticisms of her sister, which partially resulted from personality differences, offer an insight into the complexities of working-class women's activism in Depression-era Appalachia. The intersection of class and gender for working-class women in Harlan County led to sometimes conflicting approaches to politics. As Jacquelyn Dowd Hall noted in her groundbreaking work on the strike activity of female textile workers in Elizabethton, Tennessee, women who protested unfair working conditions often held a variety of opinions on women's roles in society.⁶ Like the "disorderly women" described by Hall, Jackson implicitly combined working-class solidarity and militancy with a view of politics that contested gender roles that limited women's sphere to the domestic front. By seeking a leading role in the movement to organize Harlan County miners, and workers nationally during her time in New York City, against the wishes of her husband, Jackson demonstrated a willingness to part with established gender roles. However, her decision to continue writing songs that emphasized working-class maternal politics complicated

⁵ Aunt Molly Jackson, Field Recordings Conducted by Mary Elizabeth Barnicle, New York City, 1939, Mary Elizabeth Barnicle and Tillman Cadle Collection, AppMs-347, Subgroup II, Series C, Box 9, Archives of Appalachia, East Tennessee State University.

⁶ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "Disorderly Women: Gender and Labor Militancy in the Appalachian South," *The Journal of American History* 73, no. 2 (September, 1986), 354-382.

her relationship to patriarchal gender norms. Further, Jackson did not actively promote equal employment opportunities for women, which likely resulted from the long-held, and at the time unquestioned, policy of not allowing women to work in the mines. In that regard, she did not differ much from Mother Jones. However, her pursuit of political involvement against the desires of her husband set the stage for future generations of activists in Appalachia who combined working-class identity with a politics that emphasized women's right to equal employment and state support for communities left impoverished by the vicissitudes of the global economy. The three women discussed in this thesis inspired women in Harlan County to advocate for community empowerment, the rights of welfare recipients, and, eventually, women's right to seek employment in the mines. As demonstrated by historian Jessica Wilkerson, the activism of the 1960s and 1970s built on the work of Depression-era activists, just as the latter drew on the pathbreaking work of women like Mother Jones in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁷

Regardless of their individual political positions and attitudes, Jackson, Gunning, and Reece all engaged in political work. As supporters of a union backed by the Communist Party, all three became involved in the conflicts that divided the political left during the Great Depression. By working alongside the National Miners Union in Kentucky and various party supporters in New York City, Jackson placed herself more firmly in the leftist camp than either Gunning or Reece did. For her part, Gunning seemed to adopt many of the same opinions that her sister did initially, and her songs expressed a fervent hatred of capitalism, which she blamed for the suffering she personally endured. However, she later came to sharply oppose involvement

⁷ Jessica Wilkerson, *To Live Here You Have to Fight: How Women Led Appalachian Movements for Social Justice* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 9, 17-29.

with Communist Party activities, a stance that reflected the hostility many former supporters showed the NMU once they discovered the union's connection to a doctrine that advocated atheism and the overthrowing of the United States government. When Gunning changed the title of her song, "I Hate the Capitalist System," to, "I Hate the Company Bosses," she signaled a repudiation of her sister's, and her own, political beliefs, even as she continued to support workers' organization and blamed mine operators for the poor pay and dangerous conditions that afflicted mining families. Of the three women discussed in this thesis, Gunning appears to have been the least involved in politics after the Harlan County War. She thus represented one element of Appalachian women's activism. In many ways, Jackson was an outlier. While the NMU relied on the support of many working-class women in Harlan County, most, including Florence Reece, did not become as dedicated to the causes espoused by the Communist Party as Jackson did. This did not mean that they lacked interest in politics. Certainly, Gunning's lack of involvement in overt political activity during her later life did not mean that she eschewed all interest in politics, nor did it detract from the value of her body of work composed in the 1930s.

In contrast to Gunning, Reece remained involved in politics following the Harlan County War, but she chose to do so much closer to home than did Jackson. In the years after she composed "Which Side Are You On?," Reece worked with the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee to continue advocating for workers' rights. Unlike Jackson, her political work following the Harlan County War largely did not focus on the composition of songs for the labor movement. While she did write other songs, "Which Side Are You On?" remains her enduring contribution to the sonic repertoire of organized labor. In a sense, she represented a third option that lay between the explicitly leftist views articulated by Jackson and the relatively apolitical Gunning. Her work at Highlander, while caricatured as Communist by the school's conservative

foes, focused largely on organizing workers, and Reece appears to have avoided the schismatic nature that engulfed the Communist Party during and after the Great Depression. However, while she did not have the same day-to-day relationships with Communist Party stalwarts and supporters that Jackson did, she maintained closer ties to the labor movement than Gunning did. Through the organizing and training done at Highlander, Reece continued the work she had begun in Harlan County.

While Jackson, Gunning, and Reece are all most remembered as writers of songs used to inspire workers on the picket lines in Harlan County, they also provided a gendered perspective on the coal wars, women's role in the labor movement, and domesticity that male union members could not offer. They all centered a form of maternal politics in their songs that emphasized the suffering inflicted on women and children by poor wages and working conditions. Additionally, they demonstrated an understanding of the working-class that differed from the male-centered view held by many union members and leaders before and during the Great Depression. When Gunning called on union members to make Harlan County, and by extension the United States, "a land of freedom for workers like you and me," she placed herself firmly in the working-class.⁸ Likewise, when Jackson called herself a union woman, she reminded her listeners that Harlan County women were vital to the labor movement, just as they were vital to the maintenance of the capitalist system at large.⁹ Jackson, Gunning, and Reece all considered themselves to be fundamentally working-class, and they did not view reproductive

⁸ Sarah Ogan Gunning, "Come All You Coal Miners," Recorded 13 November, 1937, Alan Lomax and Mary Elizabeth Barnicle Collection, AFC 1938/008, American Folklife Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁹ Aunt Molly Jackson and John Greenway, "I am a Union Woman," *The Songs and Stories of Aunt Molly Jackson*, Folkways Records, FH 5457, 1961, Smithsonian Institute, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings.

labor as less valuable than paid labor, a view they shared with other female labor activists. With their view of the working-class, they inspired the women activists who came later, including the women who successfully argued for equal employment rights in the mines that Wilkerson centers in her work.

Jackson, Gunning, and Reece all acted in ways that conflicted with contemporary gender norms. For middle-class Americans, including those who read about Jackson's New York exploits in the popular newspapers and magazines of the time, songs that described working-class women's familiarity with and support for militant action appeared shocking. Like Hall's "disorderly women," they challenged contemporary sensibilities, even as their arguments primarily focused on the impacts capitalism had on the domestic realm. Like the Communist Party activists described by Tiece, Jackson, Gunning, and Reece stressed the contradictions inherent in a system that expected women to fulfill domestic tasks, yet often denied them the employment opportunities necessary to the completion of those tasks.¹⁰ For Jackson and Reece, especially, and the women whose work Tiece analyzed, politics did not end with the fulfillment of specific strike goals. Unlike many of the women Temma Kaplan described in her work on working-class women in early twentieth century Barcelona, working-class women in the Great Depression often went beyond limited action.¹¹ By seeking a larger transformation of society than they could effect in Harlan County, Jackson and Reece went further than many of their predecessors. At the same time, they clearly did not ignore local activism. Like the women who followed them in the 1960s, they recognized the linkages between local and national issues, and they incorporated both local and class-based organizing to maximize the effects of their work. Of

¹⁰ Tiece, *On the Picket Line*, 1-3, 34-42.

¹¹ Temma Kaplan, "Female Consciousness and Collective Action: The Case of Barcelona, 1910-1918," *Signs* 7, no. 3, Feminist Theory (Spring, 1982), 545-566.

course, not all women who supported the NMU in Harlan County went on to become engaged in the larger movement for workers' rights. Like Gunning, some drifted away from overt political action on anything resembling a national or regional scale, even as they continued to support efforts to promote and sustain unionism in Harlan County. The actions taken by the three women discussed in this thesis represent just some of the choices available to Harlan County women, and their decisions demonstrate some of the complexities that divided and united Appalachian women during the tumultuous period in which the Harlan County War took place.

In addition to their contemporary impact, Jackson, Gunning, and Reece wrote songs that remained social movement staples for decades following the Harlan County War. Cover versions of such songs as "I am a Union Woman" or "Girl of Constant Sorrow" ensured that subsequent generations of folk music performers would keep their memories alive. Thus, Jackson, Gunning, and Reece continued to inspire workers through versions of their songs recorded by such pro-union folk singers as Pete Seeger and Rosalie Sorrels. Cover versions ensured the songs' longevity, and they provided links between Depression-era labor organizing and union activities throughout the remainder of the twentieth century.

Of the songs discussed in this thesis, none had a more powerful impact than "Which Side Are You On?" With its original lyrics, the song became a staple of the labor movement during the 1930s and beyond. The Almanac Singers, which included renowned folk singer Pete Seeger, recorded a version in 1941 that immortalized the song among pro-labor elements in American society. During the following decades, other prominent artists covered the song, while others wrote new lyrics to fit different circumstances and social movements. For example, Billy Bragg, a punk rock musician and activist, recorded a version of the song in 1985 that substituted Reece's lyrics for a message that called on British coal miners to support the then-ongoing strike

against mine closures and reduced pay in the wake of Margaret Thatcher's decision to lessen the British government's role in supporting the country's coal mines. More recently, Ani DiFranco performed a version in 2012 with lyrics that emphasized the stark choices she saw between austerity and welfare, democracy and corporation-dominated politics, and gender equality and patriarchy. In 2015, meanwhile, hip hop artist Talib Kweli wrote and recorded a rendition of the song that protested police brutality.

As an adaptable expression of working-class consciousness and social movement goals, "Which Side Are You On?" has transcended the immediate context in which Reece wrote the song. Just as Jackson, Gunning, and Reece drew on pre-existing melodies for their songs, subsequent artists have built on the templates they provided to write and perform songs that speak to and inspire a wide range of social movements. Further, folk singers performed and adapted songs written by all three women during the folk music revival in the 1960s, demonstrating their relevance beyond the Harlan County War and the Great Depression. As contributors to the pro-labor folk music canon that took shape in the 1930s, Jackson, Gunning, and Reece created songs that, in both their original and adapted forms, continue to inspire workers and social movement participants.

Finally, Jackson, Gunning, and Reece all wrote songs with the goal of organizing workers in mind. Like their contemporaries in the Carolina Piedmont or Detroit, Michigan, all three recognized the value that music held as a tool for encouraging solidarity and working-class consciousness. By writing lyrics that expressed miners' common grievances, they created a focal point around which organizing drives could coalesce. Additionally, their songs expressed workers' discontent through language and music immediately familiar to miners and their families. By utilizing melodies derived from songs that most people in Harlan County knew and

speaking to experiences miners could relate to, Jackson, Gunning, and Reece offered workers a form of protest that combined entertainment, communal experiences, and the opportunity to share grievances, heartache, and anger.

Women's activism in Depression-era Appalachia featured complexities, nuances, and contradictions that defy easy categorizations. This thesis has sought to explore these complexities to better understand the meaning of Appalachian women's activism to the labor movement, to Appalachian and working-class identity, and to the female activists themselves. When analyzing the words and actions of Aunt Molly Jackson, Sarah Ogan Gunning, and Florence Reece, it is important to recognize that they composed songs for multiple purposes. While their works most obviously served to embolden striking miners and remind them of the reasons for their activism, the songs also enunciated gendered understandings of capitalism, the coal wars, the sexual division of labor, and the composition of the working-class. While they differed from other female labor folk singers, such as Ella Mae Wiggins from Gastonia, North Carolina, in that they organized in an industry that did not employ women, their songs often focused as much on communicating with working-class women as with working-class men. Their subtle criticisms of a labor movement that privileged male voices and concerns led Jackson to commit to activism against her husband's wishes, and all three women strongly identified not only as working-class, but also as workers. At the same time, they explicitly identified as women in their works, and the intersections of the two identities feature strongly throughout their songs.

This thesis has sought to analyze the intersections of gender and class in Appalachia during the Great Depression through the lens of the Harlan County War. As one of the most visible of the conflicts that are collectively known as the coal wars, the Harlan County War held much in common with conflicts that took place throughout the coalfields in the preceding

decades. However, the conflict took place during an era in which the sexual division of labor, which emphasized families centered around male breadwinners with women performing the domestic work of childrearing, cooking, cleaning, and performing other tasks necessary to the survival of the family, came into question as a result of workers' constricted wages. Although women's paid employment opportunities contracted during the Depression, many women in the era questioned contemporary gender roles as it became increasingly obvious that the male breadwinner ideal could not sustain twentieth century American families. Throughout the United States, working-class women organized to promote state action to address poverty and to persuade employers to recognize labor unions, pay higher wages, and improve working conditions. Jackson, Gunning, and Reece took part in this movement of working-class women, which worked within and alongside the established labor movement. While their songs did not explicitly call for improved employment opportunities for women, their claim to the dignity and rights due to all workers put them into conversation with female leaders and union members who demanded equal access to employment for all women. Additionally, they, as part of a national movement that included women from every region of the country and from a variety of racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds, set the stage for working-class women in succeeding decades who organized for equal employment rights for women, equal pay, and equal dignity with male workers. As important members in the movement for worker's rights, and indirectly in the movement for women's rights, Jackson, Gunning, and Reece warrant the attention that earlier generations of labor historians all too often only reserved for male workers. As creators and disseminators of labor folk music, including songs that remain recognized classics of the labor movement, they demonstrated the enduring power of music to promote social change and encourage people to organize to effect social transformation.

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