"Red Networks: Women Writers and the Broadcast Blacklist"
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One day last spring, I gave my students crayons and construction paper and asked them to draw pictures of the traditional family. When they had finished, I taped the pictures on the wall and we sat back for a few minutes to study them. We were all struck by how formulaic the pictures were: dad was white, middle-class, and wore a tie (many students had included an old-fashioned briefcase); mom wore a dress and was flanked by her two children; the home that stood behind them was suburban; and the lawn was a modest expanse of Tru-Green emerald. Asked if their own families looked like the version they had drawn, one or two answered in the affirmative, while the majority of students proceeded to describe a wide range of familial arrangements. When I asked them where they had learned about the images of family they had included in their pictures, they told me television, a number of them sheepishly referring to sitcom families ranging from *Leave it to Beaver* to *Everyone Loves Raymond*.

My students' pictures vividly illustrate how we remember family in the US. Indeed, when images of the family and family values are conjured by media and politicians alike, these images recall not the diversity of family and family forms that are part of our history, but the moral and political absolutism of the nuclear family, with its financially autonomous white male breadwinners. As historian Stephanie Coontz has observed, when it comes to notions of the family, US culture treats television programs like *Leave it to Beaver* as documentaries rather than as industrial products created by producers and writers for advertisers and networks.[i] Thus we forget, at some cost, that images of the nuclear family and the representations of the family that have dominated television screens were the result of bitter struggles over the meanings of family and gender in the years

following World War II. These struggles were particularly pitched in media fields, where, at the dawn of the age of television, writers and other creative people were converging on the new industry. Although these writers did not share a unified vision of what it meant to be a man, a woman, or American in the late 1940s and early 1950s, a consensus would be imposed on the content of television during the early 1950s, through a variety of institutional forces and pressures that came to be known as the blacklist.

This essay focuses on the forcible imposition of a consensus about gender and family in the broadcast industry. Because we remember the 1950s through images largely created by the television industry, scholarship on 1950s television as well as work on the blacklist has neglected some important facts. First, we have very little information about the existence of challenges to the family ideal that took root in the 1950s on the part of writers very much interested in using television to challenge the open intolerance of the racist, sexist, and xenophobic forces that were gathering strength in the post-war era. Second, the open sexism of the 1950s – and its legacy in the fact that we still recall women's role during that period in primarily domestic terms – has made invisible the presence of professional women in media industries in the first half of the twentieth century. Even those critical of the blacklist share this historical amnesia, focusing on the heroism of blacklisted men like the Hollywood Ten and forgetting the double and sometimes triple vulnerability of the professional women who would be singled out not only because of their political views, but because the lives they led did not conform to conservative prescriptions about gender.

There were, in fact, women working in the broadcast industry in the 1930s and 1940s, some of them, like Gertrude Berg, Bertha Brainard, and Mary Margaret McBride, in prominent and influential professional roles.[ii] Perhaps because broadcasting was understood to be the poor relative

of cinema, perhaps because television was a brand new field, women writers found the broadcast industry a less sexist work place, finding in broadcasting successes that were withheld from them in the film industry. As writers, producers, and actors, these women often had ideas that sharply diverged from the homogeneous representations that would come to dominate television screens in the 1950s, particularly when it came to race, ethnicity, gender, and class.

I do not want to suggest that simply because these writers were women, they held progressive or radical political views. Republican Vice-Presidential candidate Sarah Palin offers a timely reminder that gender and progressive politics do not necessarily go hand in hand. In addition, the existence of white supremacist women who promoted the blacklist in the 1930s and 1940s contradicts the naïve belief that women are somehow naturally disposed to tolerance.[iii] However, women working in the broadcast industry differed from conservative women in important ways. First, these women had consciously resisted conventional gender roles in order to succeed professionally. Many of them were unmarried or in non-traditional relationships; a number were childfree; and they did not conform to the domestic family ideal that would eventually take hold. In addition, located in New York City, these women writers lived and worked in a creative milieu that encouraged them to question the status quo and to think about possibilities for progressive social change. These women had good reason to question and challenge conservatives who devalued their achievements and sought to eliminate them from the industry.

Before looking specifically at two of these writers, I want to say a few words about the broadcast blacklist. Lists of people working in film and broadcast who were suspected of being Communists had circulated since the early 1930s. Some individuals and private organizations published books, like Elizabeth Dilling's influential *Red Networks*. The FBI nurtured and backed the blacklist, corresponding with people like Dilling and also monitoring the black press and people in

the culture industry with Civil Rights sympathies from the 1920s onward.[iv] Although the FBI did not publish this information, it was disseminated by the many FBI agents who went to work for blacklisters, advertisers, and networks. Perhaps most importantly, congressional and legislative committees that shared Elizabeth Dilling and J. Edgar Hoover's commitment to the anti-Communist crusade, like the US House's Dies Committee (1938-1944), California's Tenney Committee (1947-1950), and most infamously the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) (1938-1975) not only provided conduits for relaying the FBI's suspicions to the public, they also provided searchable indices for groups interested in compiling lists of names of those suspected of subversion and those mentioned in relation to them, like the American Legion, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and American Business Consultants, publishers of a book titled *Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television*.

Popularly referred to as the "bible" of the blacklist and published just days before the start of the Korean War in June, *Red Channels* took full advantage of earlier indices of names as well as the panic that accompanied the conflict in Asia. The volume listed the names of "red" individuals and their subversive activities. *Red Channels* was distributed for free to 4,000 executives in advertising and broadcast who used the list to make hiring decisions. The publishers of *Red Channels* encouraged this use, out of concern, they said, with the Communist Party's "intensive efforts to infiltrate every phase of our life." The Party, they claimed, used television programming as "sounding boards, particularly with reference to current issues in which the Party is critically interested: 'academic freedom,' 'civil rights,' 'peace,' the H-bomb, etc."[v]

Importantly, the anti-communist forces that created the blacklist were both racist and sexist. All of the blacklisters were opposed to civil rights and immigration; many of them were also openly anti-Semitic; they despised the liberalism of the New Deal; and they believed that women,

by virtue of their anatomy, had no place outside the home, unless their extra-domestic activities were oriented toward promoting conservative politics.[vi] In keeping with their racism, the anti-communists' vilification of what one issue of the blacklisting rag *Counterattack* called "Commugressives," was most aggressively applied to those who supported Civil Rights.[vii] Network executives strictly policed the color line in the television industry, out of fear, they claimed, that featuring black performers would cause "controversy," a code word for sponsor boycotts of programming and related blacklisting activity. Progressive variety show hosts (most of them Jewish men), who featured black performers on their programs were censured and ultimately eased out of the industry. Writers who wanted to produce anti-racist programming found their scripts censored or their careers jeopardized. And actors like Jean Muir, who had long supported the NAACP and had used her celebrity status to promote Civil Rights issues, found themselves unemployable.[viii]

In addition to their racism, anti-communists understood white women's participation in the work force to be evidence of Soviet influence. As author Gerald Horne points out, "The spread of a conservative antifeminist domestic ideology was an essential component of Cold War policies that sought to contain not only the spread of communism and the unleashed atomic bomb but also the potential power of women."[ix] Women working in broadcast thus became easy targets for the blacklist, their very presence – as professional women and as progressives – defying rightwing dogma about women's proper post-war role in society. These women's anti-racist political activism threatened the very fabric of anti-communist white supremacy, by challenging the belief that white women required the protection of white men from racialized threats.

Of the 142 names listed in *Red Channels*, 43 were women: thus thirty percent of those blacklisted in a male-dominated industry were women. The listings included actors and performers, like Pert Kelton, Gypsy Rose Lee, and Minerva Pious, as well as lesser-known women who wrote for and produced broadcast media. Women were affected by the blacklist in two main

ways. Some were directly identified in *Red Channels*, like Vera Caspary, Ruth Gordon, Shirley Graham, actor Jean Muir, Fredi Washington, and others. Others were indirect victims of the blacklist whose political activities or relationships to, and solidarity with, other blacklistees effectively gray listed them. Although their names appeared on no official lists, people like Gertrude Berg, Joan LaCour Scott, and producer Hannah Weinstein were rendered unemployable through rumors of their association with blacklisted people. Because the blacklist occurred at such a transitional moment in the broadcast industry, in which writers were migrating to television from theater, radio, print, and film, many of those named by *Red Channels* were singled out not because of their work in broadcasting, but because conservatives were concerned about the work they might do.

In what follows, I focus on two of the better known women writers affected by the broadcast blacklist – one African-American, the other Jewish; one a communist, the other a New Deal liberal; one who was prevented from even working in broadcasting; the other, one of the most important figures in broadcast history. Shirley Graham was a leader in anti-racist and anti-fascist social movements, while the liberal Gertrude Berg's political work was confined to the more polite spheres of electoral politics and public charity. Together, Shirley Graham and Gertrude Berg foreground the presence of diverse women at the birth of television, while at the same time vividly illustrating the range of ideas and speech snuffed out by the blacklist.

Born in Indianapolis in 1896, Shirley Graham's father was an African Methodist Episcopal preacher and her mother was half Cheyenne. Because her father was known as an effective mediator for troubled congregations, Graham spent her childhood traveling across the country, as the family followed her father's assignments. After the failure of a first marriage, Graham's two small children remained with her parents while she traveled to Paris in 1927, enrolling in the Sorbonne, writing

occasional articles for the *Portland Advocate*, an independent black newspaper, and becoming acquainted with the community of African Americans and Africans living in Paris at the time. Her biographer credits Graham's experiences in Paris as introducing her to "a part of her heritage with which she was unfamiliar," in a setting absent the racism of the United States."[x]

A full accounting of Graham's achievements is not possible in a single essay, but I do want to mention a number of her most important contributions to US culture. In the late 1920s, Graham became the first African American woman to write and produce an opera. *Tom-Tom* was an opera that "sought to map the journey of Africans in North America from slavery to freedom."[xi] Produced by the Cleveland Opera in 1932, it was the first all-black opera to receive a full-scale production. In 1936, Graham moved to Chicago where, as she put it in an interview, she "was drawn into the Federal Theatre as Supervisor of the Negro Unit of the Chicago Federal Theatre."[xii] Of the situation into which she found herself thrust, Graham noted,

> They were getting ready to dismiss and throw this unit out anyway so they were going to give it to a Negro, you see, well, and they say look how they failed. Well, now that was a challenge so I took it and I pulled the people together.[xiii]

Far from failing, Graham repeated the success of *Tom-Tom*, producing a number of popular and critically acclaimed productions for the Federal Theater Project and further demonstrating an aptitude for popularizing African American culture and music through productions that included *Swing Mikado,* a "jazz version of the Japanese-themed *Mikado*"; an adaptation of Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* for a black cast; a play that Graham wrote and produced called *It's Morning* about a slave mother contemplating killing her daughter; as well as a three-act play about workplace disaster and class conflict within an African American mining community.

Like other triumphs Graham would experience in the 1930s and 1940s, the success of Graham's Negro Unit was in large measure the cause of its demise. According to her, "It was the

unit that probably attracted more attention than any other unit of the Federal Theatre and which probably was one of the main reasons why the Congressional Committee and so forth got on top of the Federal Theatre, and finally it was closed."[xiv] Thus, early in her career, Graham learned the price she would pay, as an African American woman and a socialist, for the cultural work she created.

Although Graham's initial successes were in the area of music and theater, by the early 1940s, she began writing the biographical novels for which she subsequently received the most attention. In the main, these books were aimed at an adolescent audience and intended to introduce young readers to characters, debates, and ideas they were unlikely to encounter anywhere else. The genre of adolescent fiction allowed Graham to pursue her interest in restoring the lives and contributions of African Americans to US culture, as well as to popularize anti-racist ideas and themes for a young audience. As she put it in a radio interview for Negro History Week in 1950, she wrote about historical figures like Booker T. Washington, George Washington Carver, Benjamin Banneker, Phillis Wheatley, Frederick Douglass, Pocahontas, and Jean Baptiste Pointe de Sable, the Haitian founder of Chicago "Because I felt impelled to present the case of the Negro in the making of American history."[xv] In these novels, Graham explored the complex mechanisms of economic, racial, and gender oppression, chronicling the solidarity and spirit of resistance that existed among oppressed peoples.

Graham understood this creative work as being part of the continuum that included her participation and leadership in social movements for civil rights and economic justice. Like other prominent Communist Party members of her day, Graham was circumspect about her membership. But she made no secret of her political beliefs, whether these appeared in her creative work or in her political work with groups like the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee (later

labeled a Communist front organization by HUAC); the defense of the Martinsville Seven, black men who had been convicted of raping a white women and who were eventually executed for the crime; her support for the Hollywood Ten; and myriad other organizations, political campaigns, and petition drives.

It has proved difficult to determine when the FBI first began monitoring Graham because of her political activities, although it is certain that the Bureau was collecting information about her by the end of World War II.[xvi] Surveillance of Graham by anti-communists intensified because of her relationship with prominent sociologist and Civil Rights leader W.E.B. Du Bois, which began in the early 1940s. Graham's FBI records make it clear that the FBI was also alarmed by the content of her adolescent novels (particularly those on Paul Robeson and Frederick Douglass, which were repeatedly referred in her FBI files). One FBI summary of Graham's activities cited a letter received by J. Edgar Hoover from a confidential informant, who complained that "*Paul Robeson, Citizen of the World*, by Shirley Graham" was a book not "fit for formative young minds."[xvii] Graham's skill at popularizing leftwing ideas and her access to media (particularly what one special agent in charge referred to as access to "the subversive press") also concerned the FBI. A report from the FBI's notorious New York City Red Squad urged caution in approaching Graham directly, since "the subject is an Editor of a Communist Publication and she is a lecturer and writer of Communist propaganda having access to publication in both Domestic and Foreign Communist publications."[xviii]

Graham's listing in *Red Channels* was odd, since like African American poet Langston Hughes, who was also listed, she was not known for her work in broadcasting. Graham had done some work in the industry: in the 1930s, she had researched radio audiences with NBC while attending graduate school at Yale; *Tom-Tom* had been broadcast on NBC; and CBS had adapted and broadcast two of her biographical novels (on George Washington Carver and Phillis Wheatley). But

Graham's ventures into broadcasting had not been sustained or extensive, her greatest successes having been in the area of book publishing. Nevertheless, anti-communist forces concerned that successful African American writers like Graham and Hughes might move into television ensured that access to the medium would be cut off by the blacklist.

Fearless and outspoken, Graham was one of the few blacklistees to speak at length about the personal impact of *Red Channels*. In 1951, Joseph Goldstein, editor of the Yale Law Journal, wrote to all those listed in *Red Channels*, asking them to answer five questions about the effects of the blacklist on their lives. A few weeks later, Elmer Rice, Chairman of the Committee on Blacklisting established by the Authors' League of America sent a similar questionnaire. Fresh from W.E.B. DuBois' indictment under the Foreign Agent's Registration Act and trial, Graham's response was swift and bitter. In her letter to Rice, Graham expressed surprised by her inclusion in *Red Channels*. Mimicking the language demanded by anti-communists, she wrote him:

> I am not now and never have been employed in the radio and television fields. My inclusion, therefore, in *Red Channels* is particularly vicious and unwarranted. If you will notice the large numbers of Negroes listed it becomes evident that here is <u>another</u> studied attempt to drive every Negro American away from all cultural expressions. [original emphases][xix]

In her correspondence with Goldstein, Graham elaborated on how *Red Channels* affected "all cultural expressions." Demands "had been made," she added, "that my books be withdrawn from the schools and libraries" of Scarsdale, New York and protests soon followed from upstate New York, home of American Business Consultants, as well as Wheeling, West Virginia. [xx] In addition, networks suddenly cancelled several radio publicity appearances for *Your Most Humble Servant* (Graham's award-winning book about Benjamin Banneker) without explanation.

Graham also began to experience difficulties getting her work published. Although her first novel written for an adult audience, an account of journalist and anti-slavery activist Anne Newport Royall, received enthusiastic reviews from publishers, five major publishing houses rejected it. As Graham noted

> No publisher has criticized the manuscript as a piece of writing. This we could understand and accept. Novels are always worked on after being accepted by some publisher. But these refusals have each time been vague and in certain cases obviously reluctant. [original emphases][xxi]

Letters from publishers rejecting the novel bear this out: they are vague, uncomfortable, and lacking in specific criticism of the manuscript, typical of the non-specific rejections blacklisted cultural workers experienced. The novel was never published. Graham understood that of all her novels, this one on Southern journalist Anne Newport Royall, was inflammatory for its time, dealing as it did not with black struggles against racism, but with a white woman's opposition to it. As she put it in an interview before the blacklist killed the book, Anne Newport Royall's name appeared in

> no book on journalism written in the United States today. Why? She did not go along with the crowd . . . . because a Southern White woman said that slavery was a cancer eating into our national life, and that it will in the end destroy us if we do not wipe it out . . . . that woman's name has been wiped out of history! [xxii]

Writing about Royall, Graham expressed her own fear that the blacklist would wipe her name out of history as well.

In the end, *Red Channels* was used not only to prevent Graham from distributing her work through mass media in general, it also closed off her access to production. As she put it, describing

the multiple venues through which the blacklist operated, "As an author it is extremely difficult to put one's finger on such things as 'denial of employment' and the like. Books can be attacked through distribution channels, publicity, handling in stores."[xxiii] Worse followed as the 1950s wore on, and the FBI, the INS, and the State Department subjected Graham and W.E.B. DuBois to escalating harassment. Graham's support for the Rosenbergs (she was one of five trustees of the funds collected for the Rosenberg's two sons), the powerful and moving critiques of racism that she made in lectures delivered around the country, as well as both DuBois' growing international reputation made them security threats in the eyes of the US government. Unemployable, their movements and activities intensely documented by the FBI, their mail constantly tampered with, suspicious of even those close to them (the FBI cultivated acquaintances who provided details of their itineraries and activities), and with the elderly DuBois in failing health, the couple moved to Ghana in 1961.

On one point at least, the blacklisters proved correct: Graham was very much interested in the new medium of television. In Ghana, Graham became close to President Kwame Nkrumah, and in the years before the 1966 coup that unseated him, Graham founded the first television station in that African country, becoming "the first woman TV director in the world."[xxiv] In an address she gave at a Ghanaian university, Graham observed, "Television is the newest, the most powerful, the most direct means of communication devised by Man. Its potentialities for Good or for Evil are boundless."[xxv]

But Graham never had the opportunity to explore television's potentialities in the US. Not only did the blacklist end Graham's life and career in the US, it also erased her own considerable achievements from history. Graham herself was bitterly aware of this irony: she had worked so diligently and passionately to restore historical figures who had been marginalized by virtue of their race, gender, and class, only to follow them into the annals of obscurity.

Certainly, Graham's race and her revolutionary vision of an anti-racist society made her an obvious target for anticommunists. Yet the fate of other, more moderate progressive women illustrates how even those with mainstream liberal views became targets for the blacklisters, who regarded liberals mainly as dupes of communist fronts. The case of Gertrude Berg is a particularly instructive one in this regard. For where Shirley Graham was a critic of US culture, Berg was a celebrant of what she understood to be the diversity and inclusiveness of US culture. Partly, this discrepancy in viewpoints resulted from the very different class and race positions occupied by these two women. Indeed, Berg's background could not have been more different than that of Graham. Born Tillie Edelstein in New York City in 1899, Berg grew up in East Harlem, spending her summers at her father's hotel in the Catskills, where she was first introduced to vaudeville. Berg's paternal grandfather had immigrated from Lublin, Poland, and the twinned influences of vaudeville and the immigrant Jewish culture from which it emerged were to be key elements of the popular culture that Berg would go on to create in the 1930s.

Edelstein married Lewis Berg at the age of nineteen and the couple had two children before settling in New York City in 1926. With Lewis' support and encouragement, in 1926, Berg adopted the pseudonym "Gertrude Berg" and began working on the dialogues that would become the scripts for two series, the short-lived *Effie and Laura* and the long-lived *The Rise of the Goldbergs*. The former was the story of two Jewish salesclerks from the Bronx. Cancelled by CBS after the first episode aired in 1928, the incident taught Berg an important lesson about media audiences in the early days of broadcasting: the first and most important audience for programming was networks and advertisers. Actual listeners were a distant second. *Effie and Laura* was a case in point -- cancelled not because of some consensus on the part of listeners, but because network executives

objected to its politics, particularly Laura's assertion that "marriages are never made in heaven" and because of a casual and ostensibly blasphemous reference to god.[xxvi]

When *The Rise of the Goldbergs* premiered in November 1928, like the characters in *Effie and Laura,* the narrative centered on working-class Jewish culture, but this time the central female character was the mother of two young children, who lived in a tenement in New York City. During this intensely anti-immigrant and anti-Semitic period in US history, at the height of the popularity of fascist personalities like Father Coughlin and when support and sympathy for anti-immigration and Nazism were at their height in the US, Gertrude Berg wrote radio scripts that celebrated Jewish life and culture, in the context of a working-class, immigrant family who loved America and staked a claim to being the quintessential American family. Molly Goldberg quickly became an icon of American motherhood, at least for listeners, who saw in her character a reflection of their own everyday lives and cultures.

Berg was a prodigious and prolific writer, who for the three decades that *The Goldbergs* ran wrote every word of the scripts for her radio and television broadcasts. Focused on the web of relationships that animated the tenement building at 1033 Tremont Avenue in the Bronx, episodes dealt with everything from match-making to the plight of Eastern European Jews to the ups and downs of Jake's dress-making business to Jewish religious rituals, including several Seder celebrations, Molly and Jake's son Sammy's bar mitzvah, and innumerable weddings. In *The Goldbergs*, the domestic sphere was both the head and the heart of society. Although story lines typically set credulous, generous Molly up to fail, episodes almost invariably closed with Molly's values triumphing over her husband Jake's rational, corporate approach to life.

In one episode, for example, first written for radio and later adapted for the television series, Molly serves on a jury. Although circumstantial evidence points to the defendant, Frank Clark, being guilty, through a combination of persuasion and sheer obduracy, Molly convinces her fellow jurists to acquit him.[xxvii] When Clark's subsequent behavior seems to confirm his criminal nature and to undermine Molly's belief in his innocence, Jake smugly observes that, "That's why women shouldn't serve on juries." But the end of the episode once again restores Molly's authority when Clark is absolved of any criminal activity. Triumphantly, Molly tells her husband, "I combined myself, Jake – Heart and head . . . what's one without the other . . . and the other without one . . .? Nothing!"[xxviii]

Like other blacklisted writers, Berg's narratives reflected her political worldview. Neighbors in the tenement struggle with Depression-era poverty and unemployment. The Mrs. Bloom to whom Molly continually yoo-hoos through her trademark window and dumbwaiter never seems to have enough food for her family and her husband is chronically unemployed until Molly cajoles Jake into hiring Mr. Bloom at his dress shop. And even though *The Rise of the Goldbergs* was very much about the American Dream and class mobility, Berg never relinquished a distinctly working-class sense of community, insisting that economic success be shared and used for the benefit of the wider community rather than the individual family unit. In one episode, Jake lectures Molly on the importance of ambition, telling her in exasperation, "I can see you're only a voman. And don't understand life. Vat wod you know about a man's ambitions?," adding "embitions means vhat you're never satisfied with vat is."[xxix] Jake concludes:

> "Look, I'll give you a far instance . . . . Ef a man is got five dollars, he vants ten dollars! Get de point? Mr. Finkelstein started with ten machines in his factory, and he didn't stop embitioning ontil he got fifty."

> Thoughtfully, Mollie looked at him. "and dat's vat you call membition? Oy, Jake, by me dot looks like a sickness."[xxx]

Commenting on the excessive hours Jake works in another episode, Molly exclaims: "Oy, vat beezness! Saturday, Sonday, holledays. Plain talking all de time! Vy don't you buy a bed and slip dere and finished! And dat's beezness? It's a slavery – jost like in Oncle Tom's Cabinet!"[xxxi]

Press accounts of *The Goldbergs* took a dim view of Molly's linguistic practices. Some saw her accented English and malapropisms as confirming the lowbrow status of radio. One article, for example, that appeared in the *Evening World*'s radio section, explicitly mocked the series: "So, Nu, It Geeves a Leesten by de Goldboigs," subtitled "Hm, Sotch a Beeznis by de Studio Wit Meester Wit Meesiz Wit de Keedies."[xxxii] The radio show, the article continued, "is a very nice tale. It gives us so many chances to be nasty and superior, and we get so few opportunities as a rule." Journalists and arbiters of high culture in New York City saw Molly's language and immigrant status as a source of shame and embarrassment. Native-born or assimilated themselves, that is, they sought to distance themselves from an immigrant past that had become shameful within the context of heightened anti-immigrant sentiment.

But to mistake the press's understanding of *The Goldbergs* for that of listeners is to fundamentally misunderstand how actual audiences responded to the series. As much as media institutions, advertising executives, and anti-communists may have disapproved of the series' liberal messages, its Jewishness, its woman-headed household, its immigrant culture, its critiques of consumerism, they still had to contend with its overwhelming popularity among listeners. Non-Jewish and Jewish listeners who had immigrant parents or grandparents responded warmly to

Molly's dialect and domestic humor. In one of the thousands of fan letters Berg received, Mary E. Kelly of Cleveland, Ohio wrote:

> And, of course, we love Mollie! – For her tolerance, which she preaches so beautifully – without preaching; for her understanding heart; for her love of her little family; for the many worries she hides so valiantly behind her happy ways; for her patience in achieving the desired end in view, without hurt or unkind speech; -- for her sympathy with the views of the younger generation in her family, without relinquishing her gentle authority – in fact, for just being Mollie [original emphases].[xxxiii]

Berg received similar letters from non-Jewish listeners and viewers throughout the series' lengthy run. As late as 1949, a television viewer wrote,

> you are doing a masterly job toward fighting anti-Semitism. I am not Jewish, but I have many cherished Jewish friends, and really the whole problem is getting acquainted, isn't it? That is one reason why your program is so important. I especially enjoyed tonight's program about the Seder. The humorous part was delightful, but I am so glad that you finished the program with the very beautiful ceremony that belongs with the spirit of the Seder. [xxxiv]

Defying the gospel of audience segmentation preached by networks and sponsors, Jewish and non-Jewish listeners alike not only enjoyed the cultural aspects of *The Goldbergs*, they relished its political messages as well.

For Jewish listeners and viewers, *The Goldbergs*' presence on the radio and television spectrum conveyed other meanings. Commenting on a 1933 Seder broadcast, one listener wrote:

> I believe the Jews throughout the world owe to you and your sponsors a great debt because I feel your broadcasts have done a great deal to counteract the anti-Semitic propaganda such as put forth by the Nazis and which would have the non-Jew believe that we are a tricky, conniving selfish race.[xxxv]

Another listener wrote a more personal testimonial about a later Seder broadcast:

> I found it a bit silly for a man to write fan mail, but reason for this first letter was to thank you for bringing to me and I am sure to many others the "Jomtof" feeling of home. It happened on Pesach 1936 the first Jewish Holyday I spent in this country; I had to live in a rather small place, just came there a few days before the days of Pass-Over began, so I did not know anybody, did not receive any invitation to a Seder. Then suddenly came the well-known prayers and melodies of home to me, thanks to you and your courage to bring Jewish characters to the Air. A year ago I said courage, coming from Germany I could not believe to hear such a program, but today I know that this country really means freedom, so it was not so much courage, but instead admiring this all I have learned to love your heart, which always brought back to me to real feeling of a mother, a Jewish mother to her children and to her family.[xxxvi]

A rabbi Berg had consulted about a wedding ceremony reiterated the cultural importance of *The Goldbergs* for Jews, concluding his letter by saying, "I am glad to help any little way that I can, because I think that you are doing more for 'better understanding' and 'good will' of an international and interracial character than all the organized movements."[xxxvii] A listener from Arkansas shared this sentiment, posing the following rhetorical question in a letter to Berg:

> I wonder Mrs. Berg if you realize what you are doing to carry on the Jewishness we are used to – there is so much of our traditions, so many of our folk expressions – so much of the real things that makes us Jews – of which so many of our race is ashamed? From the bottom of my heart I thank you and sincerely I feel your fifteen minutes each night is a Kadish and memorial to my darling mother – may you and your little group continue![xxxviii]

Jewish organizations, like the National Council of Jewish Women and the Anti-Defamation League, added their own testimonials in fan letters.

While Berg's messages of tolerance and community might seem tame compared to Graham's revolutionary anti-racism, understood in the context of the 1930s, Berg's messages were uniquely important. At a time when there was a virtual blackout on the plight of European Jews on radio, *The Goldbergs* openly discussed the rise of anti-Semitism in the US and in Europe.[xxxix] In one episode, the family talks about Kristallnacht. Later in the episode, a stone is thrown through the Goldbergs' window during a Seder celebration. And even though the thousands of letters variously addressed to Gertrude Berg, Molly Goldberg, the networks, and sponsors demonstrated that audiences generally responded positively to the series, *The Goldbergs* did not find favor with networks and advertisers who either understood their audiences as largely anti-Semitic or were themselves anti-Semitic. In fact, Berg successfully used the volume of fan letters and telegrams she received to prevent the series from being cancelled on three separate occasions. In 1929, a week before her contract with the network faced cancellation, Berg developed a sore throat and could not perform on the evening's broadcast. After 110,000 listeners called and wrote to WJZ expressing concern over Molly Goldberg's absence from the airwaves, NBC extended the contract for the remainder of the 1929-1930 season. And despite its continued popularity with listeners, *The Goldbergs* was cancelled by NBC in 1934, prompted, according to Berg's biographer, by conflicts

over Berg's demands for better compensation and greater executive and creative control. Still, even though the series continued to be popular among listeners, when it finally returned to the air in 1936, it switched network affiliations five times before being cancelled yet again in 1945.[xl]

In short, the business community had never liked the politics and culture of *The Goldbergs*, favoring the racist content of the popular *Amos 'n' Andy* over *The Goldbergs* in 1934 and remaining uncomfortable with the series' New Deal liberalism throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Only its popularity among listeners, which Berg herself repeatedly leveraged in support of the program, kept it on the air. This very precarious balance fell apart in the early 1950s, when the sea change in political climate and the work of the blacklist enabled networks and sponsors to finally kill a series that had long made them uncomfortable. The series was politically vulnerable on other fronts, as well. On June 12th, for example, just two weeks before *Red Channels* hit the stands, the entire cast of *The Goldbergs* honored a technician's walkout and refused to perform, much to the chagrin and embarrassment of CBS, which was forced to deal with dead air time. And Berg consistently hired actors without regard for their political affiliations. Several of those she hired had already been called to testify before HUAC. At least four of would eventually be listed in *Red Channels*: actor Philip Loeb who played Jake Goldberg on the television series; actor and singer Burl Ives made a guest appearance as himself on the show in May 1950; African American actor Fredi Washington made sporadic appearances as *The Goldbergs*' maid in 1949 and 1950; actor and writer Garson Kanin had also appeared on *The Goldbergs* and maintained friendly relations with Berg. Like other mainly Jewish broadcast stars who had graduated from vaudeville, including Milton Berle and Eddie Cantor, Berg also violated the color line in television, first by hiring Fredi Washington and second by publicly discussing plans to develop a character for actor Eartha Kitt, whose performance in Leonard Sillman's theatrical review, "New Faces of 1952," had so impressed her.[xli]

Berg's popularity with audiences gave her some immunity to the blacklist, as did her careful cultivation of a star persona based on a very traditional maternal ideology. Even though blacklisters did not directly attack this icon of American motherhood, they dropped hints and innuendoes in interviews with the press. Vince Hartnett, who wrote the introduction to *Red Channels*, cited *The Goldbergs* as evidence that the broadcasting industry was "indirectly but effectively" helping to "subsidize Stalinism in this country."[xlii] "It is believed," Hartnett slyly added, "Miss Gertrude Berg, the 'Mollie Goldberg' who also writes and produces the series, had disavowed her past Communist-front affiliations."[xliii]

Hartnett and others found a more suitable target in the shape of actor Philip Loeb, who played Molly's husband Jake, and "whose affiliations over the years hardly denote sympathy for our American capitalist system, let alone complete loyalty to our form of government."[xliv] The assault that followed Loeb's listing in *Red Channels* was vicious and protracted:

> So low were the blows [against Loeb] that an elderly actor, a brass-collar Republican who had voted for Coolidge, Hoover, Landon and Wilkie, defended the accused in *Equity Magazine*: "The charges against you, Mr. Loeb," he wrote, "seem to be four in number. 1. That you are a Jew. 2. That you are a Communist. 3. That you are a troublemaker, a rabble-rouser. 4. That you are personally ambitious.[xlv]

Gertrude Berg initially defended Loeb and, against the wishes of the network, sponsor, and advertising agency, refused to fire him. Additional pressures were brought to bear on Berg. In 1951, sponsor General Foods dropped *The Goldbergs*, publicly asserting, "It was the <u>least lucrative</u> of all General Foods' evening TV properties" [original emphasis], but neglecting to mention that the drop in revenue resulted from a sponsor boycott, rather than lower ratings.[xlvi] Elsewhere, General

Foods stated that their reason for cancelling the show involved a "trend on the part of food sponsors to drop expensive TV shows because of the new price cutback," although *The Goldbergs* could hardly have been more expensive than programs like *Arthur Godfrey & His Friends* and the *Frank Sinatra Show*, both of which featured expensive and established male stars.[xlvii] In a moment of uncharacteristic honesty, one advertising executive wrote to Berg in 1952, revealing that "the only disappointment which either we or the client [at that point Ekco Products Company, a manufacturer of bakeware] have had in connection with the show has been in regard to clearances" of personnel accused of being red.[xlviii] After a troubled run first on NBC and then on the financially troubled DuMont Network, the series died a quiet death in 1954.

Gertrude Berg continued to work in the more forgiving venue of theater, winning a Tony Award for best actress for her role in *A Majority of One* in 1959. She attempted yet another comeback on television in the series *Mrs. G. Goes to College*, which ran for a single season on CBS in 1961-1962. She died suddenly of heart failure in 1966, at the age of 67. The ending to Philip Loeb's career was swifter and more tragic. In 1955, out of work, homeless (he had been living with blacklisted actor Zero Mostel's family), and depressed about his inability to provide medical care for his schizophrenic son, Philip Loeb took an overdose of sleeping pills and died in a hotel room in New York City.

Like Shirley Graham, Berg's unique role in US culture has until very recently been almost completely overlooked, largely as writer David Zurawik has remarked, because of the blacklist. According to Zurawik, "the founders of the networks were uncomfortable with that history and their role in it and so she sort of became a story they didn't want to tell because it brought up the narrative of the blacklist. And so she sort of fell by the wayside."[xlix]

The cases of Graham and Berg illustrate the wide ideological net cast by the blacklisters, giving us a glimpse into how the blacklist decisively ended the careers of both radical and liberal women, as well as the pluralistic messages to which they were committed. As Stefan Kanfer puts it in his chronicle of the blacklist, progressives "claimed for . . . [themselves] what the right could not – abiding humanity and tolerance."[l] The struggle among progressive writers to use television to combat racism, anti-Semitism, anti-immigrant sentiment, and to a lesser extent, sexism – to popularize ideas grounded in an expansive vision of American culture – was terminated by the blacklist. Institutionalized in its place was the white, suburban, heteronormative ideal so crucial to the blacklisters' understanding of America. In the years that followed the imposition of the blacklist, writers expressing progressive viewpoints were similarly eliminated from the industry or forced into the margins, like gray listed writer Joan LaCour Scott, who, when she could find work at all, was relegated to writing for children's programs like *Flipper*, *Daktari*, *Lassie*, and years later, *The Waltons*, a program that provided employment for several blacklisted writers and actors.[li]

The blacklist had ramifications beyond its impact on the individual writers and cultural workers about whom I am writing. It also chilled the speech of other writers, issuing a clear warning about the kinds of content and representations the new medium would tolerate. As Gertrude Berg put it in a 1956 interview: "You see, darling, don't bring up anything that will bother people. That's very important. Unions, politics, fund-raising, Zionism, socialism, intergroup relations. I don't stress them. And after all, aren't all such things secondary to daily family living?"[lii] Writer and producer John Markus later described the "Network's oversensitivity to special interest groups" as emerging during the blacklist era.[liii] But Markus' claim is deceptive, ignoring as it does the fact blacklist institutionalized an "oversensitivity" to complaints lodged by conservative groups.

Not only did the blacklist eliminate a generation of progressive cultural workers from the industry, those remaining had been taught a lesson that would become standard operating procedure for years to come. Indeed, long after the era of direct sponsorship had ended, producers and writers were self-censoring so as to avoid any hint of controversy – to avoid "anything that might bother people." Of course, "people" referred to those on the conservative end of the political spectrum. It was, of course, perfectly acceptable to offend women, people of color, immigrants, lesbians and gay men, and thoughtful people as a whole. The blacklist merely made it unacceptable to offend the finer sensibilities of racists, sexists, homophobes, anti-Semites, and other disciples of hatred and intolerance. Today, as the FBI considers an expansion of its authority to infiltrate opposition groups before a reasonable suspicion of criminal activity has been established, as books featuring lesbian or gay characters continue to be banned from public libraries, as the US government continues to use fear as a strategy for attacks on a wide range of civil liberties, as discussion of family values continues to be used to exclude and divide, we would be well-served to remember the very intolerant forces and ideas these activities have benefited in the past.

NOTES

[i] S. Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, New York: Basic Books, 1992, p. 29.
[ii] M. Hilmes makes this point in *Radio Voices*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.
[iii] See G. Jeansonne, *Women of the Far Right: The Mother's Movement and World War II*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
[iv] A.G. Theoharis and J.S. Cox, *The Boss: J. Edgar Hoover and the Great American Inquisition*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988, p. 57.
[v] *Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television.* New York: American Business Consultants, 1950, p. 2.
[vi] In contrast, and whatever its other shortcomings, the Communist Party had made race and racism central to its organizing strategy in the US, defending black youths falsely accused of rape in the Scottsboro case, organizing black workers in the south, and fighting against segregation throughout the US. It would have been surprising indeed if Communism had not become synonymous with Civil Rights during this period, given the refusal of either Democrats or Republicans to support the anti-lynching legislation and other progressive Civil Rights measures promoted by the Communist Party.
[vii] *Counterattack: Facts to Combat Communism*. Letter No. 58, 2 July 1948.
[viii] See the following articles for a sense of Muir's Civil Rights activism: "5000 in Bronx Rally Hit Hate," *Chicago Defender*, 7 August 1943; "Call 297 Colleges to NAACP Meeting," *Chicago Defender*, 25 September 1943; "Hastie, Jean Muir to Talk at NAACP Student Event," 11 September 1943; "High-Low Democracy," *Chicago Defender*, 23 September 1950.
[ix] G. Horne, *Race Woman: The Lives of Shirley Graham Du Bois*, New York: New York University Press, 2000, p. 24.
[x] Horne, p. 53.
[xi] Horne, p. 58.
[xii] "Oral History Interview with Mrs. Shirley Graham Du Bois," Nashville, TN: Fisk University Library, Shirley Graham DuBois Papers, Schlesinger Library, Box 1, Folder 1, SGD Oral History Transcript, 7 January 1971, p. 1.
[xiii] "Oral History Interview with Mrs. Shirley Graham Du Bois," p. 2.
[xiv] "Oral History Interview with Mrs. Shirley Graham Du Bois," p. 20.
[xv] S. Graham, "Negro History Week Interview," WMEX Boston, Shirley Graham DuBois Papers, Box 27, Folder 3, 18 February 1950.
[xvi] Horne, 90-91. Graham was listed under numerous names in the FBI's records (her maiden name, both her married names, family nicknames, and odd combinations of all of these). One FOIA request made under the name "Shirley Graham DuBois" by this author turned up a 120-page file, while a separate FOIA request made under the name Shirley Graham yielded approximately 2000 pages.
[xvii] "FBI Memorandum from SAC New York to J. Edgar Hoover," 14 June 1961, p. 11.
[xviii] "FBI Report," 19 June 1961.
[xix] "Letter to Elmer Rice," Shirley Graham Du Bois Papers, Box 17, Folder 9, 30 January1952, p. 1.
[xx] "Letter to Mr. Joseph Goldstein," Shirley Graham Du Bois Papers, Box 17, Folder 5, 22 December 1951, p. 1.
[xxi] "Letter to Mr. Joseph Goldstein," p. 2.
[xxii] "As a Man Thinketh in His Heart, So Is He," *The Parish News: Church of the Holy Trinity*, New York: Brooklyn, Vol. LVII, No. 4, Shirley Graham Du Bois Papers, Box 27, Folder 3, 1-5 February 1954, pp. 1-5.
[xxiii] "Letter to Elmer Rice," p. 2.
[xxiv] Horne, p. 175.
[xxv] S.G. DuBois, "Address to Kwame Nkrumah Ideological Institute," Shirley Graham Du Bois Papers, Box 44, Folder 9, 26 May 1964, p. 1.

[xxvi] G. D. Smith, *"Something on My Own': Gertrude Berg and American Broadcasting, 1929-1956*, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2007, p. 29
[xxvii] "1950: The Goldbergs, Jan. 2," Radio Script, Gertrude Berg Papers, TV and Radio Scripts, Box No. 38, 6 January 1950, p. 19A.
[xxviii] "1950: The Goldbergs, Jan. 2," p. 25A.
[xxix] G. Berg, *The Rise of the Goldbergs*, New York: Barse and Co., 1931, p. 17.
[xxx] Berg, 1931, pp. 17-18.
[xxxi] Berg, 1931, p. 26.
[xxxii] "So, Nu, It Geeves Leesten by de Goldboigs," The *Evening World Radio Section*, Saturday, 14 December 1929, p. 24.
[xxxiii] Letter to Mollie and Jake and Sammy and Rosie, from Mary E. Kelly, Cleveland, Ohio, Gertrude Berg Papers, General Correspondence, Vol. 1, 5 August 1932.
[xxxiv] Letter to Mrs. Goldberg from Mrs. Dorothy G. Winch, Gertrude Berg Papers, Correspondence (scrapbooks), Vol. 2, 18 April 1949.
[xxxv] Letter to Mrs. Molly Goldberg from Irving Prince, Arverne, NY, Gertrude Berg Papers, General Correspondence, Vol. 1, 12 April 1933.
[xxxvi] Letter to Gertrude Berg from Hans Altschul, Gertrude Berg Papers, Correspondence, Scrapbooks, Vol. 5, 12 September 1937.
[xxxvii] Letter to Gertrude Berg from D. de Sola Pool, Rabbi, Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, Gertrude Berg Papers, General Correspondence, Vol. 1, 8 June 1932.
[xxxviii] Letter from D. Stanley Dreyfus, Pine Bluff, Arkansas, Gertrude Berg, General Correspondence, Vol. 3, 12 January 1934, pp. 2-3.
[xxxix] See D. Weinstein's "Why Sarnoff Slept: NBC and the Holocaust," *NBC: America's Network*, ed. M. Hilmes, Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 98-116, for a discussion of the networks' silence about the plight of European Jews.
[xl] Smith, p. 73.
[xli] G. Berg (1952) "Putting the 'Cast' into Broadcasting," *Variety*, 16 July.
[xlii] V. Hartnett (1950) *Catholic World*, July 1950, p. 161.
[xliii] Hartnett (1950), p. 167. In response to this author's Freedom of Information Act request, the FBI denied maintaining a file on Berg.
[xliv] Hartnett, p. 168.
[xlv] S. Kanfer, *A Journal of the Plague Years*, New York: Atheneum, 1973, p. 4.
[xlvi] "General Foods to Drop the Goldbergs," *Newsletter, Tide: The Newsmagazine for Advertising Executives*, Gertrude Berg Papers, General Scrapbooks, Vol. 28-32, 25 May 1951.
[xlvii] *Herald American*, Chicago, IL, Gertrude Berg Papers, General Scrapbooks, Vol. 28-32, 23 May 1951.
[xlviii] Letter to GB, Earle Ludgin and Company Advertising, Gertrude Berg Papers, General Correspondence (Scrapbooks), Vol. 9, 14 July 1952.
[xlix] "From the Goldbergs to 2005: The Evolution of the Sitcom," Los Angeles, CA: *Museum of Television and Radio Satellite Seminar* Series, 2005.
[l] Kanfer, p. 23.
[li] P. Buhle and D. Wagner, *Hide in Plain Sight: The Hollywood Blacklistees in Film and Television, 1950-2002*, New York: Palgrave Books, p. 88. See also Joan Scott's comments on "Writing for Television: Television and the Blacklist," *Museum of Television and Radio Seminar Series*, Los Angeles, CA: 17 November 1997
[lii] D. Zurawik, *The Jews of Prime Time*, Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2003, p. 45.
[liii]"From the Goldbergs to 2005."