Want to Start a Revolution?

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Shirley Graham Du Bois

Portrait of the Black Woman Artist as a Revolutionary

Gerald Horne and Margaret Stevens

Shirley Graham Du Bois pulled Malcolm X aside at a party in the Chinese embassy in Accra, Ghana, in 1964, only months after having met with him at Hotel Omar Khayyam in Cairo, Egypt.[1] When she spotted him at the embassy, she "immediately . . . guided him to a corner where they sat" and talked for "nearly an hour." Afterward, she declared proudly, "This man is brilliant. I am taking him for my son. He must meet Kwame [Nkrumah]. They have too much in common not to meet."[2] She personally saw to it that they did.

In Ghana during the 1960s, Black Nationalists, Pan-Africanists, and Marxists from around the world mingled in many of the same circles. Graham Du Bois figured prominently in this diverse—sometimes at odds—assemblage. On the personal level she informally adopted several "sons" of Pan-Africanism such as Malcolm X, Kwame Nkrumah, and Stokely Carmichael. On the political level she was a living personification of the "motherland" in the political consciousness of a considerable number of African Americans engaged in the Black Power movement. That is, if Black—mostly male—radicals saw Africa as the geopolitical epicenter that would "give birth" to the global struggle against racism and colonialism, Graham Du Bois served as a Pan-Africanist matriarch and elder to help guide this process.

Yet Shirley Graham Du Bois's pioneering efforts as an African American female artist, Pan-Africanist, and Marxist have been marginalized in conventional discourse on the "Who's Who" of twentieth-century Black radical figures. Graham Du Bois's historical contribution is often delimited

by her prominent status as the wife of W. E. B. Du Bois, towering African American intellectual and honorary "Father of Pan-Africanism." Indeed, her radicalism climaxed *after* the death of her husband in 1963. Remaining in Ghana from 1963 to 1966, Graham Du Bois played a central role in actively supporting Nkrumah's political strategy: namely, gaining full and complete independence from the West by thwarting the economic domination of the North Atlantic powers throughout Africa—and, moreover, championing socialism as an alternative socioeconomic system on the continent. Therefore, she might have been shocked, but she was not necessarily surprised when, on the morning of February 24, 1966, she found herself under house arrest after the Ghanaian military staged a coup to oust Kwame Nkrumah from power. At sixty-nine years of age, Graham Du Bois was about to embark on another life—one of her many lives—by resituating herself geographically, emotionally, and politically, settling in Cairo and spending time intermittently in the United States, China, and Tanzania.

The journey as a political activist began relatively late in Graham Du Bois's life, but the long road she had traveled as Shirley Graham, a working-class—albeit prolific—artist and mother, provided the existential basis for her subsequent commitment to transformative politics. Born in Indianapolis, Indiana, in 1896, Graham had spent much of her adulthood as a Black single mother whose later pursuit of antiracist activism and Marxism was undoubtedly influenced by the personal struggles she faced as a black woman in America's Jim Crow labor market based on the superexploitation of Black women. In short, as the Great Depression left millions of Americans without sufficient employment, shelter, or food, Graham was among the countless Black women who were compelled to work intermittently as household servants in order to feed their families.

As we shall see, in her efforts to become a renowned artist, she was continually negotiating within a dominant cultural apparatus in which she had to adhere to social mores of both "Negro" and female "respectability" if she hoped to secure any recognition from her peers, much less any financial compensation to be put toward her household. Yet she served as a composer, actor, director, producer, and musician all by the age of thirty-eight. Certainly these achievements would be remarkable by any standard, but even more so for a working-class Black woman of her time. Further still, she was positioned from a working-class standpoint that, though not immediately reflected in her art, laid the basis for her intensifying angst with the class-based system of white supremacy in the United States.

But if the material basis for Graham's lifelong dedication to transformative politics was fundamentally rooted in her struggles as an adult, then some seeds of this incipient "race woman" were also sown during her childhood while under the influence of her father, David Graham. Reverend Graham was a "race man" in his own right, serving as a proud member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and promulgating the cause of "racial uplift" championed by its leader and his daughter's future spouse, W. E. B. Du Bois. But her father's affinity for "talented tenth" leadership did not hinder his commitment to organizing everyday Black people for militant direct action against Jim Crow racism. Graham recalled her father once leading a prayer service with a loaded gun over his Bible while they were living in New Orleans, calling upon the women and children to clear the church while he and twenty-one men, locked and loaded, remained and prepared to ward off an encroaching lynch mob.[3]

Because she was a woman, Graham was encouraged by her father to revere the power of the pen over that of the sword to effect social change. Strikingly, in Graham's adulthood, she would come to champion the power of both the pen and the sword, ostensibly gender-bound forms of resistance. While residing in Colorado Springs at the age of thirteen, Graham wrote in to a local paper, unleashing her personal anger with racial segregation after having been denied entry into a Young Women's Christian Association site because she was Black. "You are now thirteen . . . young but not too young to speak out in protest against this kind of evil by a so-called Christian organization," her father advised. And she dutifully adhered.[4] If in her later years Graham Du Bois tended to favor Pan-Africanism over Marxism, perhaps her eyewitness accounts of Black workers struggling against Jim Crow without the support of their white class brethren were an important causal factor; the white female companion who witnessed Graham being denied entry at the YWCA did not come to her defense.[5]

The contradiction, however, is that David Graham inculcated in the young Shirley a responsibility to challenge segregation in the "public sphere" only to enforce normative gender roles in the "private sphere." He instilled in his daughter the commonplace notion that a woman's primary social identity ought to be as a mother and caretaker. She was therefore taken hostage by the norms of "mothering," norms that reinforced the social division of labor between men and women, and thus she spent the better part of her youth caring for her siblings and assisting her mother in

household tasks. In time, however, Graham turned her "mothering" skills into a political weapon through which she later—armed with ideologies of Marxism and Pan-Africanism—defended "race men" such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Kwame Nkrumah.

Anchored though she was in the domestic sphere, Graham found the leverage to excel intellectually and artistically as a young adult.[6] But opportunities for African American women, even those as brilliant as Shirley Graham, were slim in the Pacific Northwest during World War II, and after high school she attended a trade school where she qualified as an office clerk, eventually landing in Seattle. There she met and soon after married Shadrach T. McCants in 1921.[7] By the age of twenty-five she transitioned, albeit reluctantly, into the role of a wife and mother, and bore two sons, Robert in 1923 and David in 1925.

The details of her marriage to McCants from 1921 to 1927 are among the most obscure in her life, but she remained relatively stationary both geographically and professionally for the duration of the marriage. She retrospectively obscured her own biography during these years, proclaiming falsely that McCants had died in the 1920s. However, what emerges quite clearly is the fact that their two sons would remain the single most important personal and political anchors in her life. In her words, "Everything I did, everything I planned, everything I tried to do was motivated by my passionate desire to make a good life for my sons."[8] As a mother, Graham factored her sons into the equation of every subsequent calculation. Further still, as an analogue to this ideology of maternalism, she figured influential men into her life choices, making it her business to defend such leaders as Du Bois, Nkrumah, and Malcolm even when her efforts were met with harsh resistance.

But her anchor within the domestic sphere quickly gave way with Graham's divorce from McCants, and she at once became a globe-trotter, taking off for France in 1927, when, according to Tyler Stovall, "blackness became the rage in Paris during the 1920s." In Paris she became acquainted with prominent African Americans such as Eric Walrond, onetime editor of Marcus Garvey's newspaper, *Negro World*, and writer for the Urban League's journal, *Opportunity*.[9] Here too she encountered various forms of African music that she incorporated into her first opera entitled *Tom-Tom*. But Graham remained a single mother who had financial responsibilities associated with her two sons, who remained in the United States under the care of her mother. Therefore, during her ventures in Paris with the Black artist community from 1927 to 1930, she returned to the States

intermittently to tend to her children and augment her income, working as a music librarian at Howard University and as a music teacher at what now is Morgan State University, while taking summer classes at Columbia University.

Graham was not directly engaged with the political struggles at Howard that were sharpening in the wake of the Great Depression in 1929, but she was there during a wave of student strikes in the late 1920s.[10] In the process of becoming a pioneering Black woman composer, she produced an early version of *Tom-Tom* in 1929 while at Morgan State with the teamwork of trailblazing Black male artists such as actor Roland Hayes, director Randolph Edmonds, and filmmaker Carlton Moss.[11] Most notable about the opera was the way in which it fused "Harlem cabarets" with African rhythm, representing the "beating heart of a people."[12] In a time when the Jim Crow United States was overwhelmingly averse to taking Africa seriously as an origin of modern culture, this opera boldly placed Africa at the center of the African American experience in North America from slavery to freedom.

But *Tom-Tom* also adhered to the predominant cultural norms of the society because it portrayed Africans as a fundamentally emotional, rather than intellectual, political—much less proletarian—people. Even her female dancers staged a protest prior to one performance by refusing to wear only rags for their bottoms while dancing topless.[13] As we shall see, Graham later abandoned the "striptease" portrayal of women in her creative work only to reinforce such controversial theories as biological determinism and the women's sphere, both of which were evident in *Tom-Tom*.

Needless to say, *Tom-Tom*'s success did not pay the bills; therefore, Graham in the meantime enrolled at Oberlin College in 1931, where she worked at breakneck speed to complete both a B.A. and an M.A. by 1935 while also working part-time as a laundress like so many other Black working-class women of her day. Consider the amazing accomplishment of Graham as a single Black mother in her midthirties who completed college and graduate school while raising two sons and working for negligible pay. She then opted to keep her elevated credentials in the African American community by teaching fine arts at the historically black school now called Tennessee State University, rather than traveling to Vienna, which was an option for her at that time.

Teaching history, music theory, and French with insufficient supplies, little pay, little time for her sons, and even less time for her own artistic

endeavors, however, left Graham thoroughly disillusioned. She remained at Tennessee State for only the 1935–1936 academic year, taking up a position in Chicago as director of the Negro Unit at the Federal Theatre Project (FTP), the government-funded sanctuary for progressive cultural workers during the Depression.

While working at the FTP from 1936 to 1938, Graham continued to grow as an artist, venturing away from opera and into the world of theater by directing such critically acclaimed plays as *Swing Mikado* and *Little Black Sambo*. Leftists of the Popular Front milieu such as Black Communist writer Richard Wright, also in Chicago, dismissed her work as an example of the "waste of talent" in FTP productions, since it opted to depict "jungle scenes, spirituals and all" over proletarian struggle.[14] But when she directed Theodore Ward's play *The Big White Fog*, a now unfortunately obscure drama that grappled with Garveyism, African American families, and burgeoning Left, she was met with equal invective from Chicago elites—Black and white alike, including the local NAACP chapter, which dismissed the play as "communist propaganda."[15] With the subsequent disbandment of the FTP for alleged Communist subversive activity in 1938, Graham's later affinity toward the Communist Party was, quite ironically, anticipated—if not precipitated—by this early red scare. All the same, she emerged from the project with an enhanced reputation as a composer, director, and producer, as well as with a little acting experience. She was quickly accepted into the Yale Drama School to study theater even further.

Yale was "all that [she] expected and more," since she also studied German and Italian and even began contemplating a dissertation.[16] But despite the support from such prominent African Americans as Charles Johnson and Adam Clayton Powell Jr., she found that her white patrons, such as Mary White Ovington of the NAACP, were apologetic about her "Negro plays" when seeking investors for her. Moreover, when Graham attempted to perform her plays through African American theater companies, she found herself even more marginalized. Graham's *Coal Dust*, a play that signaled her growing interest in Marxism insofar as it was an "old fashioned type of play about workers," which was performed at the Black-run Karamu Theatre in Cleveland, Ohio, was quickly abandoned because it lacked the financial backing for major—read non-Black—advertising. At the time, white-owned theater houses had the monopoly of theatrical productions, and the emergence of Black-run theater projects was received with considerable hostility from the dominant cultural apparatus. Her

work with the FTP prematurely aborted by the anticommunist suspicions of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), and efforts at Yale frustrated by the racism of her purported mentors, it is no wonder that she would later spend a significant portion of her life fighting the political repression thrust upon "Red" and Black people. Exasperated with the obstacles associated with producing African American theater, by 1941 she had abandoned her work at Yale and her artistic career altogether for a job with the YWCA in Indianapolis.

Graham's transition away from theater, however, was not a political retreat in the face of racism and sexism. Quite pragmatically, she needed a salary increase to support her children, and a change of careers was in order. In 1942, after a brief tenure at the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA in Indianapolis, where she served as a director of adult activities, she was awarded a position as the YWCA-USO director at Fort Huachuca, Arizona, where 5,000 Black enlisted men and 6,000 Black officers formed the "largest contingent of Negro soldiers in the country."[17]

She arrived at Fort Huachuca at an opportune moment; the Black soldiers were in an uproar against a rash of police brutality cases inflicted by the white military police on post. The NAACP was quite active in organizing these soldiers, focusing on the case of Ollie D. North, who was charged with mutiny for using a loaded rifle to terminate a military police beating of a fellow Black soldier.[18] Graham also intervened on behalf of North and "reached the General and influenced him to reopen the case and by military ruling had the soldier's sentence changed to ten years." In the process she was endearingly referred to as "mama" by the Black troops whom she, apparently, both mothered emotionally and defended politically.[19] Needless to say, her Christian employers were far from enamored with her maternal-turned-political actions; she was dismissed shortly thereafter.

Graham understood her dismissal quite clearly (if not literally) in black-and-white terms: "My ladies at the YWCA-USO . . . ordered me to come into New York City for a conference. When I got here they coolly informed me that the USO was not interested in some of my activities which were outside the recreation program of the USO." Her own evaluation of the firing was that "in the final analysis white supremacy has us by [the] throat because the white man has the money. Yet I'll be damned if I'm sorry."[20] Again she had witnessed a scenario in which the militant self-defense against racist terror was carried out by Black people while the perpetrators were white. On a personal level, her reactions to the firing

revealed a deep-seated anger that pitted "us" against "the white man," which was a key tenet of the Black Nationalist ideology she would later profess.

As a result of her experience in Arizona, Graham deepened her commitment to the NAACP because it had been the primary organizational ally in her own struggles against racism. Therefore, upon her dismissal from the USO she immediately packed her bags for New York City to work as an assistant field director for the NAACP. She became active in the group when its membership was in the process of reaching an all-time high, from 40,000 in 1940 to 400,000 in 1945, but she was convinced that it could reach "one million."[21]

Her experience organizing NAACP chapters was significant for several reasons. First, it demonstrates that Graham was part of the "long" civil rights movement dating back to the Communist and NAACP organizing campaigns in the South during the Great Depression. Second, it unearths a political transition in her own perspective that would augur her growing affinity for the Communist Party during the war. She was frustrated by what she saw as the capitulation of the southern church constituency to Jim Crow; this was compounded by what she perceived to be chicanery and chauvinism of the preachers, who were far from the legacy of Reverend Graham. "Believe me," she declared, "I can see more clearly why the Russians closed all the churches! Come the revolution—that would be the first thing I should advise—*throughout the south*. These fat, thieving, ignorant preachers! All of them should be put to work" (emphasis in original).[22] By 1943 Graham was not only thinking in terms of a "revolution" in the United States but also sympathizing with the Russian variety of social transformation and even imagining that she might play more than an advisory role. This was a self-fulfilling prophecy. But Graham's decision to resign from her NAACP position despite the fact that she had raised more than $8,000 in 1943 alone was not the apparent result of an ideological pull toward Communism; rather, she felt the "urge to do creative work."[23]

While working at the Open Door Community Center in Brooklyn, she began participating in political campaigns against police misconduct and for better housing, health care, and jobs for the local residents. Remarkably, she also found time to turn out a series of "biographical novels," as she called them, on such figures as George Washington Carver, Paul Robeson, and Frederick Douglass. While these popular biographies had helped Graham accumulate more money than she had ever made to that

point, they also placed her more closely in circles with local and international Communist figures who were guiding her artistically and politically. Among these prominent men were actor Paul Robeson, writer Howard Fast, city councilman from Brooklyn Pete Cacchione, and, most notably, W. E. B. Du Bois, who though still far from being a Communist, was also taking an increasing interest in Red activity in the United States.

Cacchione was also there as an emotional comfort to Graham when her son Robert died while living in California in 1944. This devastation propelled Graham into a more intense work frenzy, since she continued churning out biographies and even entered a doctoral program at New York University (though she did not finish). As she noted in a letter, "My entire life was work."[24] Her close interaction with these Communist men was critical to winning her political loyalty to the Communist Party, becoming more overt by 1947. In that year not only was she on a HUAC list of Red "fronts," but she was also photographed at a rally alongside Fast and Cacchione to save the Communist-initiated *New Masses* from being discontinued during the post–World War II crackdown on Communists in the United States, commonly referred to as the McCarthy period.[25]

Graham's personal and political affinities for the Communist movement became increasingly intertwined as Du Bois—her intimate "flame" since she had returned to New York in 1943—was marginalized and altogether ousted from the NAACP in 1948 for challenging the Cold War thrust of the organization's leadership. Relentlessly attacking the United States for human rights violations, W. E. B. Du Bois and Shirley Graham both supported third-party candidate Henry Wallace of the Progressive Party over Harry Truman in the 1948 election, all to the dismay of the NAACP. Graham came to Du Bois's defense, unequivocally decrying what she saw as the NAACP's "'brazen act' of 'sheer persecution' that illuminated the archaic and anti-democratic character of the NAACP's structure," toward her political comrade and lover.[26] This personal commitment to Du Bois aside, Graham's own support for the Progressive Party shows how her maternal experiences spoke to her newfound leftist politics. At the July 1948 convention that nominated Wallace (where she played a leading role), she stated, "I am only one Negro mother who has seen the doors of a great hospital closed against her dying son. . . . What do we want? That our children may dwell in peace."[27]

Du Bois and Graham were increasingly operating as a two-person united front against U.S. foreign policy; the political repercussions of their activity were imminent. In 1949, the couple sent a greeting to Joseph

Stalin, Communist leader of the Soviet Union, lauding his "leadership in uprooting racial discrimination." To this statement they alone were signatories, but it reflected the fact that a considerable number of African Americans had an increased affinity for the Soviet Union—not least because it was most directly responsible for wiping the world's most racist dictator, Hitler, off the map. And in 1949, at a rally sponsored by the Communist-led Civil Rights Congress in Peekskill, New York, she was hit with a rock by an anticommunist heckler. Du Bois, too, was suffering the repercussions of being increasingly seen as a Communist "agent," specifically because of his anti–nuclear weapons stance. So when he and Graham attended the Paris Peace Conference to discuss the prospects for nuclear disarmament, this was no doubt to the chagrin of U.S. authorities. Therefore, when she and Du Bois married in 1951 after the death of his first wife, they did so secretly and hurriedly on February 14 because, only two days later, he was to be charged in court with attempting to aid a foreign power, that is, the Soviet Union. Just as she had been his avid defender in 1948 against the NAACP, so too did she aid him in rallying financial support for his trial after he made bail.

Noteworthy about their whirlwind tour for his case is the fact that her prestige, in fact, enhanced his credibility. For example, in St. Paul, her mother's original home, the arrival of Du Bois drew the largest interracial meeting ever held in that city because he was "Lizzie Etta's little girl Shirley's husband."[28] Fortunately, though indicted, Du Bois was able to escape conviction. After the turmoil of Du Bois's case had passed, Shirley Graham Du Bois and her husband began to settle into a seemingly pacific life in their chic Brooklyn Heights home, formerly owned by writer Arthur Miller, receiving frequent guests from across the globe, ranging from UN representatives to African anticolonialists. Since they were confined to domestic affairs because both of their passports had been revoked throughout most of the 1950s, Graham Du Bois busied herself by caring for her husband and staying in the circle of Black Communists also living in New York at the time.

In particular, Graham Du Bois co-led a feminist collective alongside two other leading Black women of her period, Eslanda Robeson and Louise Thompson Patterson, also betrothed to two of the most prominent Black Communist figures of the twentieth century: Paul Robeson and William Patterson. Graham Du Bois, along with Eslanda Robeson and Louise Thompson Patterson, started a group called the Sojourners for Truth and Justice, which intended to inspire leadership of women of color across the

globe.[29] Challenging barriers of race and nation alike, the work of these Black Communist women "sojourners" indeed helped pave the way for the women's liberation movement of the 1960s that thrived on American college campuses and in the workplace, a movement so often attributed summarily to the leadership of such figures as Gloria Steinem.

But above and beyond her work within this Black Marxist feminist collective, Graham Du Bois was also beginning to perform as a key actor on the global stage in this very period when the civil rights movement in the United States was gaining strength. When leftist forces around the world were riled by the execution of alleged Soviet spies Julius and Ethel Rosenberg in the United States, she called upon her mothering skills and directly oversaw the process whereby their children were successfully adopted.[30] These domestic political engagements notwithstanding, the Du Boises leapt at the opportunity to leave the country when, in 1958, their passports were reinstated. For the better part of 1959 and 1960, the couple stayed in Europe, the Soviet Union and China—Graham Du Bois even venturing into Africa.

While the Du Boises were being wined and dined in Moscow, African Americans ought to contemplate more deeply Communism as a viable socioeconomic system because such blatant forms of racial degradation were negligible in the Soviet Union.[31] The caveat, of course, is that the Du Boises were given royal treatment in a supposedly egalitarian state not least because the Soviets understood the positive propaganda associated with catering to such influential African Americans.

Graham Du Bois, reluctantly though excitedly, left her aged spouse in Russia and departed for Africa, visiting Ghana, Egypt, Sudan, and Nigeria with a Soviet delegation. While in Ghana she gave a stirring presentation based on her husband's essay "The Future of All Africa Lies in Socialism," and at an important Pan-African gathering she replaced the flag of Taiwan with that of the Communist regime in Beijing.[32] After having traveled to China and met its Communist leader, Mao Tse-tung, Graham Du Bois proclaimed, "Wonderful! I didn't think any place could be better than the Soviet Union but I must say China takes my breath away."[33] This indicated that she was moving toward a deeper engagement with Beijing's version of socialism. Moreover, her pro-Maoist sympathies in fact anticipated the political association of the militant Black Panther Party in the 1960s with Maoism.

Subsequently, Graham Du Bois's relations with her U.S.-based, pro-Moscow comrades, even those in the Black feminist circles, were to

become increasingly strained. Upon returning to the United States to help edit the upcoming Communist-inspired magazine *Freedomways*, a spin-off of the newspaper *Freedom*, she reported in the *Afro American* that even European women had "more guts" than those in the United States.[34] Convinced, apparently, that she might be of more use to international movements than to those in the United States, Graham Du Bois was off again in 1961 (this time without her husband) and back to Ghana to attend the conference "African Women and Women of African Descent."[35]

Back in the States, W. E. B. Du Bois had made the decision to join the CPUSA, which he did in 1961. At first glance, it is curious that the couple would then turn around and move to Ghana that same year, effectively denying them the chance to organize for the American party. And yet, considering Graham Du Bois's inclination toward building an international movement based in Africa coupled with their general resentment of the U.S. government, their move to Accra was entirely fitting. Moreover, Kwame Nkrumah had arranged it so that they would have a house on the hill, complete with a steward, cook, driver, and night watchman, and in close proximity to Flagstaff House, his own home. Graham Du Bois's son David recalled that it was "like living in a glass house when you went to the home there in Ghana because it was a place of pilgrimage for people from all over the world and particularly all over Africa," as well as for Chinese diplomats and African Americans enthralled with Ghanaian state.[36]

The prominent Du Bois family, it seems, was also so enthralled with the Ghanaian state that they failed to counsel Nkrumah on the potentially negative repercussion of marginalizing the Left, much to the chagrin of American and Ghanaian Marxists. On the ideological level, Nkrumah sought to "inculcate in" the Ghanaian "working people the love for labour and increased productivity."[37] In so doing, however, he declared trade unions "obsolete," since to "struggle against capitalists" was now, he felt, an irrelevant matter, and finally mandated that Communists be "banned from entering the civil service in the Gold Coast."[38] Charged with the task of remapping Ghana's entire educational system in support of the new regime, Graham Du Bois was in no position to challenge official policies of the state. In the coming period this would further alienate Graham Du Bois from the "old school" Marxists of the Moscow milieu while deepening her influence on the "new school" radical youth of the Maoist and Pan-Africanist varieties.

Graham, however, would soon be left to wage such battles on her own since, in 1963, W. E. B. Du Bois died. If Graham had remarkably mustered

the energy to work throughout the pain after the loss of her son, Graham Du Bois managed to work even harder after the loss of her husband. She was already in the process of embarking on the most politically engaged and professionally productive position in her entire life: directing the television industry in Ghana while indirectly acting as a "first lady" to Nkrumah. Remarkably, Ghana TV would not have any commercials in that its primary function was not to serve big business; instead, Graham Du Bois stated that "the television we are planning will be a tremendous channel for education, for increased understanding and for developing and unifying the peoples of Africa."[39] Though in some ways this education did little to challenge traditional understandings of gender norms insofar as it offered "demonstrations of cooking, dressmaking, exercises, fashion shows, hints," and "interior decorations," it also quite nobly offered an "evening programme for illiterates."[40]

To learn how to run such an operation, Graham Du Bois traveled across Europe from east to west, also stopping in Japan, where she finally brokered a deal with the Japanese electronics company Sanyo to supply Ghana with the televisions for this enterprise. As a result, Graham Du Bois facilitated the effective displacement of the Philips electronics company of the Netherlands, Ghana's colonial era television supplier, and furthered Nkrumah's hope that Ghana might avoid the road toward "neocolonialism" that was the fate of so many postindependence regimes. Graham Du Bois's political ascendancy upset the self-interested Ghanaian elites, since this was the first time that anyone——much less an African American woman and "outsider"——had been given free reign to sever the traditional colonial ties that had sustained their own class positions.

Moreover, they were angered by her personal oversight of Nkrumah's health and well-being, reflected in the evening telephone calls to Nkrumah "each night at bedtime" along with advising him on such matters as his dietary needs.[41] Again, she had elided the personal with the political. As if her interventions in the economic and personal affairs of leading officials were not enough to incite discontent, Graham Du Bois additionally tested her political clout by using her influence within the Ghanaian publishing industry to praise African American Communists such as her comrade William Patterson. Given the wide reach of the Ghanaian press across the continent, Graham Du Bois helped grant distinction to a political milieu that could hardly expect the slightest praise from its own government. On her off time she also took occasion to meet with Black CPUSA leaders Claude Lightfoot and James Jackson when they came to

Ghana, often discussing the content of *Freedomways* and its ideological direction in relationship to the civil rights movement in the States.[42]

But the ties to her CPUSA comrades, especially those involved in the production of *Freedomways*, were noticeably weakened as a result of her political shifts while in Ghana. On a global level, Graham Du Bois's loyalties to the Soviet Union were becoming increasingly strained as she gravitated away from what she saw as the Moscow/King approach to "peaceful coexistence" and toward the Beijing/Black Power call for militant national liberation. She was increasingly vocal in defending China to the point that in 1963 she wrote into the Nation of Islam journal *Muhammad Speaks*, taking both Roy Wilkins of the NAACP and James Farmer to task for their anti-Chinese positions.[43] But the CPUSA had continued to remain committed to the Soviet Union, while China—and by association Graham Du Bois—was becoming anti-Soviet.

Undoubtedly she was fundamental to shaping the internationalist perspective of *Freedomways* insofar as it was she who solicited Tom Mboya of Kenya, Oliver Tambo of South Africa, and Julius Nyere of Tanzania to submit articles for the magazine. This all-star cast of African leaders was placed squarely before an ambivalent "old guard" base of leading Black activists involved with this journal just as a "new guard" representing the Black Power movement in the United States was looking increasingly to Africa and Asia as the centers of national and anticolonial struggles for liberation from Western imperialism. But Du Bois's death in 1963 placed Graham Du Bois and Esther Jackson Cooper, another editor, at odds, since Graham was enraged that Roy Wilkins was allowed to write on Du Bois though they were archenemies, whereas Graham Du Bois's picks such as Malcolm X were not accepted for submission.[44] This apparent hesitation on the part of the Old Left to break with leading Black activists of the time—even those such as Wilkins with whom they were once at odds—rather than embrace the emergent Third World leaders who were inspiring the youth of the Diaspora, would only further distance Graham from her longtime comrades in the CPUSA.

It was not simply that Graham Du Bois's "left Nationalist" tendencies complicated her position in the U.S.-based *Freedomways* circles; additionally, she challenged her political alliances with the left forces within Ghana by hiring only "professional experts" from the United States to work in the Volta region of that country. She confessed, "My heart bleeds when talented young Afro-Americans are brought to my attention and I am asked to give them an opportunity to use their abilities!" Even Robert Williams,

the author of *Negroes with Guns*, who helped jump-start the militant self-defense movement as opposed to the nonviolent philosophy of King, did not make the cut because, she said, "Africa doesn't need 'leaders.' It does need the help of skilled technicians, experienced and exceedingly well-trained."[45] Not only did this approach upset Ghanaian—and non-Ghanaian—leftists, but additionally Graham found herself politically defending Malcolm X's perceived "racialist" viewpoint from attacks by Marxist Ghanaians, stating that he was opposed to the "White government and the White ruling class" of the United States.[46]

But Graham Du Bois was also aware of the fact that many of the African American "skilled technicians" who were making their way into Ghana were "well-trained" by the State Department and other government agencies, functioning as self-interested surrogates of imperialism who, in her words, sought "better and easier living and quick profits to take back [to the United States]."[47] These "surrogates of imperialism," coupled with the anti-Nkrumah forces within Ghana, were building their political and military force, growing such that on February 24, 1966, Nkrumah's power was involuntarily abdicated; so too was that of the honorary "first lady."

Graham Du Bois guarded Nkrumah's legacy as she had done for Du Bois after his NAACP ouster. The litmus test for the political righteousness of any self-proclaimed revolutionary was their position on whether or not Nkrumah was unjustly overthrown. Graham Du Bois was to answer, of course, that he was, but many of her CPUSA friends were not quite so decisive. In particular, prominent Communist writer Anna Louise Strong enraged her when she raised the contention that Nkrumah was rumored to have been exceedingly corrupt.[48] But for Graham Du Bois there was no such thing as opposing Nkrumah from the left; to support his overthrow—or even to question his bona fides—was to aid and abet U.S. imperialism. Her days as a "comrade" in the CPUSA were numbered. Her defense of the African national liberation struggle was becoming increasingly unequivocal.

Apparently exasperated with U.S. nationals of many stripes—Red included—Graham decisively hedged her bets on Africa and lowered her political anchor in Maoist China. Although she kept her eye on the developments occurring in the United States, particularly events involving the Black Panthers on the West Coast (where her son David was to edit their newspaper) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in the South, Graham Du Bois was now off to Cairo, Egypt,

where she would be based for the duration of her life, residing intermittently in China, Tanzania, and the United States.

Cairo was in the midst of its 1967–1968 conflict with Israel when she arrived, and Graham Du Bois had decided to support a regime that, in her words, had quite appropriately "raised a blockade against white imperialism and aggression rather than against Zionism or the Jewish people."[49] As her political hatred of "white" imperialist foreign policy intensified, her political affinities became more "Egypt-centric." Indeed, Egypt in particular and Afro-Centrism in general would become a major theme in the lectures she would deliver to American students when she returned to the United States in the 1970s.

Supporting Egypt's leader, Gamal Nasser, however, also put Graham Du Bois in a delicate and sensitive position as a Red—analogous to her support for Nkrumah in Ghana—precisely because Nasser was receiving aid from Moscow while suppressing the oxygen supply to the Communist movement in Egypt. This occurred as her relations with Beijing became even closer. Because she was never lacking in vanity, it did not hurt that China had not only given her spouse ample airtime on Radio Peking while in Ghana—and most recently, Chinese officials had met her in Tanzania after Nkrumah's overthrow and pulled out the red carpet for her.[50]

Transitioning into a stalwart defender of China was not, however, without its own contradictions for Graham Du Bois, whether or not she recognized this fact. The Chinese-U.S. normalization of diplomatic relations during the Nixon era at first frustrated her. But apparently she opted not to challenge the mandates of Beijing (which was her normal response of late). Perhaps she was wary of once again courting the wrath of a powerful state whose political repression might have been too much at her age. But more likely, she truly believed that China, with all its flaws, promised the one and only "third way" as a state alternative to Soviet and U.S. influence over the "darker races" of the world.

By the 1970s, Graham Du Bois was back in the United States after a huge left-liberal spectrum—including, ironically, Roy Wilkins—garnered support for her right to return and lecture at campuses across the country. While she had refused to sever ties with her CPUSA friends leading the W. E. B. Du Bois Clubs—considered "revisionist" by her newly minted Beijing allies—she did quite pragmatically (perhaps even willingly) disavow her ties to the CPUSA itself in order to regain entry to the United States. This would seem to contradict all of the recent work she had contributed to *Freedomways* and her membership—if only nominal—to the

Party; however, her desire to reach out to the youth in the Black Power movement in the States required that she make political concessions to the same government apparatus whose repression of political dissent had at one time driven her to the left. On her U.S. tour she spoke as a nationalist on questions related to Africa and Afrocentrism, not on class or socialism. Her Afrocentric leanings were also reflected in her novel *Zulu Heart*, which depicted the plight of the South African indigenes in their struggle against apartheid: this book included a European who, upon receiving a heart transplant from a Zulu, emerged from the operation with a new life rhythm. He could even dance! Needless to say, the *New York Amsterdam News*, a prominent Harlem-based weekly paper loved it, biological determinist implications notwithstanding.[51] Indeed, Graham Du Bois was treading the waters of cultural nationalism in the States that would become most associated with such figures as Ron Karenga, founder of the African American ritual Kwanzaa in 1967.

As late as 1975 she was still lecturing in the United States, even working for brief stints in New England at both the University of Massachusetts in Amherst and Harvard University teaching literature. But she could also be found on the West Coast attending gatherings sponsored by the Black Panthers in Oakland and also speaking before the US China People's Friendship Association on "Africa and China."[52] For Graham Du Bois, defending China and Africa was a matter of life and death, quite literally in her case. In April 1977, after fighting the last of her many battles—this time with cancer—Shirley Graham Du Bois was laid to rest in China, a citizen of Tanzania, ending a series of her many lives in only one of her many homes.

NOTES

1. David Gallen, ed., *Malcolm X: The FBI File* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1992), 331.

2. Maya Angelou, *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* (New York: Random House, 1986), 138, 141.

3. Shirley Graham Du Bois article on coup, *Essence*, January 1971, Shirley Graham Du Bois Papers, courtesy of David Du Bois, Cairo, Egypt; Shirley Graham Du Bois, "What Happened in Ghana? The Inside Story," *Freedomways* (Spring 1966): 201–223, 220.

4. Shirley Graham Du Bois, "I Got Wings," short story (ts. draft), n.d., Shirley Graham Du Bois Papers, Subseries F, Fiction works, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute. See also Robert Dee Thompson Jr., "A Socio-biography of Shirley Graham Du Bois: A Life in the Struggle" (Ph.D. diss., University of California–Santa Cruz, 1997), 14–17.

5. Shirley Graham Du Bois, interview by Abigail Simon, April 10, 1974, Shirley Graham Du Bois Papers; Shirley Graham Du Bois, *His Day Is Marching On* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1971), 30, 31; Thompson, "A Socio-biography of Shirley Graham-Du Bois," 22–30.

6. She graduated as the class valedictorian at her Tennessee-based junior high school and later received high honors upon graduation from Lewis and Clark High School in the state of Washington, where her family had relocated in 1915. Too, she was recognized as the class poet and won an essay contest for a piece she composed on Booker T. Washington, indicating an interest in a figure to whom she would later dedicate an entire biography.

7. Elizabeth Brown-Guillory, ed., *Wines in the Wilderness: Plays by African-American Women from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1990), 79. However, on her first passport application she listed her date of marriage as July 16, 1918; see file 100–99729–84A, October 28, 1958, Federal Bureau of Investigation.

8. Graham Du Bois, *His Day Is Marching On*, 37–39.

9. Irma Watkins-Owens, *Blood Relations: Caribbean Immigrants and the Harlem Community, 1900–1930* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 156–157; Eric Walrond, *Tropic Death* (New York: Collier, 1972).

10. She might have even crossed paths with Malcolm Nurse. Nurse, alias George Padmore, was a prominent student organizer on the campus, and, as a member of the Communist Party of the United States, he was soon to become a leading Black member of the Communist International commissioned with the task of organizing Black workers, particularly seamen. Differences of age, personal responsibilities to her children, and lack of political interest might have combined to prevent her from allying more closely with this student movement, but she would not have gone unaffected by its political presence.

11. When this opera reached full-scale production in 1932, it was a tremendous success, broadcast over the National Broadcast Company radio station and winning critical accolades in the pages of *Crisis*, the influential periodical of the NAACP.

12. Program for *Tom-Tom*, ca. 1932, Shirley Graham file, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio.

13. *Afro-American*, July 9, 1932. See also *Washington Tribune*, July 8, 1932; *Boston Chronicle*, July 16, 1932.

14. Richard Wright, "I Tried to Be a Communist," *Atlantic Monthly*, September 1944, file 289882, Federal Bureau of Investigation.

15. Rena Fraden, *Blueprints for a Black Federal Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 121–122, 134.

16. Shirley Graham to W. E. B. Du Bois, October 23, 1938, Shirley Graham Du Bois Papers, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana.

17. Graham Du Bois, *His Day Is Marching On*, 52. See also Judith Weisenfeld, *African American Women and Christian Activism: New York's Black YWCA, 1905–1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

18. *New York Times*, November 28, 1942, February 17, 1943; Leopold Johnson to NAACP, April 8, 1943; Ottis Burns to James Davis, May 5, 1943; Leslie Perry to Charles Browning, September 29, 1944, box b159, group 2, NAACP papers.

19. Albert McKee to Shirley Graham, March 3, 1942, Shirley Graham Du Bois Papers, courtesy of David Du Bois, Cairo, Egypt.

20. Shirley Graham to W. E. B. Du Bois, October 30, 1942, reel 53, no. 1047, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers, University of Massachusetts–Amherst Library.

21. Shirley Graham to Walter White, July 14, 1943, box a585, group 2, NAACP Papers.

22. Shirley Graham to Mary White Ovington, August 1943, Mary White Ovington Papers, Wayne State University Library, Detroit, Michigan; Nat Brandt, *Harlem at War: The Black Experience in World War II* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996); Neil Wynn, *Afro-Americans and the Second World War* (New York: Holmes and Meir, 1976).

23. Arthur Spingam to Shirley Graham, October 5, 1943; Shirley Graham to Walter White, September 8, 1943, box a585, group II, NAACP Papers.

24. Shirley Graham to Roselyn Richardson, July 3, 1946, Roselyn Richardson Papers, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, Indiana.

25. *New Masses*, May 13, 1947.

26. Shirley Graham speech, "National Founding Convention of the New Political Party at Convention Hall, Philadelphia, July 23–25, 1948," reel 2, Third Party Presidential Nominating Conventions, Proceedings, Records, etc.

27. Memorandum, September 11, 1950, no. 100–370965–8, FBI; *Daily Worker*, March 26, 1948, May 31, 1948, December 23, 1949; *New York Amsterdam News*, December 31, 1949; *Counter-Attack*, July 1, 1949.

28. Graham Du Bois, *His Day Is Marching On*, 157–164.

29. Gerald Horne, *Communist Front? The Civil Rights Congress, 1946–1956* (London: Associated University Presses, 1988), 208.

30. Robert Meeropol and Michael Meeropol, *We Are Your Sons: The Legacy of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975).

31. *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 20, 1959; Martin Bauml Duberman, *Paul Robeson: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1988), 473. See also Shirley Graham Du Bois, "Heartwarming Memories," in *Paul Robeson*, ed. Brigitte Moegelsack (Berlin: Academy of Arts of the German Democratic Republic, 1978), 56.

32. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Autobiography: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of its First Century* (New York: International Publishers, 1968); Graham Du Bois, *His Day Is Marching On*, 301.

33. Shirley Graham Du Bois to Cedric Belfrage, April 4, 1959, box 2, Cedric Belfrage Papers, New York University Library.

34. *Baltimore Afro-American*, September 20, 1959. See also Annelise Orieck, *Common Sense and a Little Fire: Women and Working-Class Politics in the U.S., 1900–1965* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

35. From there she went to another conference while in Cairo called the "Extraordinary Session of the Afro-Asian Solidarity Council," which was specifically focused on the Congo crisis. In Cairo she signed onto an ad in a Trotskyite paper that denounced U.S. foreign policy activity in the increasingly Soviet-aligned Cuba, evidently less worried about undermining the political tensions between the Socialist Workers' Party and the CPUSA than in challenging U.S. imperialism.

36. David Du Bois, interview, June 3, 1992, Louis Massiah Papers, courtesy of Louis Massiah, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

37. Jeff Crisp, *The Story of an African Working Class: Ghanaian Miners' Struggles, 1870–1980* (London: Zed, 1984), 134. See also Ebenezer Oiri Addo, "Kwame Nkrumah: A Case Study of Religion and Politics in Ghana" (Ph.D. diss., Drew University, 1994); W. Scott Thompson, *Ghana's Foreign Policy: 1957–1966* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969).

38. Hakim Adi, *West Africans in Britain: 1900–1960 Nationalism, Pan Africanism and Communism* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1998), 163.

39. Shirley Graham Du Bois to Gladys, December 16, 1964, courtesy of David Du Bois, Cairo, Egypt.

40. Shirley Graham Du Bois to Mikhail Kotov, November 7, 1965, courtesy of David Du Bois, Cairo, Egypt.

41. Angelou, *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*, 138.

42. Shirley Graham Du Bois to John Henrik Clarke, January 24, 1965, John Henrik Clarke Papers, Schomburg Center, New York Public Library.

43. *Muhammad Speaks*, November 22, 1963.

44. Esther Jackson to Shirley Graham Du Bois, June 20, 1964, Esther Jackson Papers, courtesy of Esther Jackson, Brooklyn, New York.

45. Shirley Graham Du Bois to John Henrik Clarke, December 20, 1964, John Henrik Clarke Papers; Shirley Graham Du Bois to Cedric Belfrage, June 7, 1963, box 2, Cedric Belfrage Papers.

46. *Ghanaian Times*, May 18, 1974.

47. Shirley Graham Du Bois to George Murphy, May 5, 1963, George Murphy Papers, Howard University Library, Washington, DC.

48. Anna Louise Strong to Shirley Graham Du Bois, December 12, 1969. See also Shirley Graham Du Bois, "Nkrumah's Record Speaks for Itself"; Shirley Graham Du Bois, "Kwame Nkrumah: African Liberator," Shirley Graham Du Bois Papers, Subseries G. Clippings and Other Material Collected by SGD, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute

49. Shirley Graham Du Bois to Kwame Nkrumah, June 1, 1967, Shirley Graham Du Bois Papers, courtesy of David Du Bois, Cairo, Egypt.

50. Mrs. Huang Hua to Shirley Graham Du Bois, August 31, 1962, reel 75, no. 900, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers; Bill Sutherland, interview by author, March 3, 1995.

51. *New York Amsterdam News*, May 18, 1974.

52. *Guardian*, July 9, 1975.